

.When I was invited to give this lecture, I was asked to combine my thoughts on Waugh with reminiscences of my own time of Lancing. I am slightly worried about this, for two reasons. Firstly, I'm not sure that Waugh himself would approve. In his diaries, he describes how he, when a boy at Lancing, went to visit the College Mission in Camberwell. He describes his visit as follows: 'There is a huge gathering of parsons there, mostly risen from the ranks. A dear old, very old, bishop was there too and he fastened on to me and talked all the time about Lancing in his day. He was a dear old dodderer but rather a strain to talk to.'

My second reason for doubt is because of an experience I had in my late twenties. For some reason I was asked to come and speak at the Lancing Club Dinner. The president was General Sir John Evetts (known during the war, I gather, as 'Mad Jack Evetts'). I later got to know him very well through our membership of the Woodard Corporation, but he was to me at this stage rather a daunting figure. Introducing me to the assembled company, he said: 'I've looked through all the records, and as far as I can see Richard Griffiths did nothing whatsoever while he was at the school.' I was naturally a little taken aback, but I managed to reply in the following way: 'I'm afraid, General, that in your searches you missed my greatest achievement. It was, in fact, a sporting record. The slowest time ever recorded for the hundred yards. You may ask', I said, 'why it was recorded. Well, my brother Roger was timing that event, and had brought an extra stopwatch, and waited at his post until I finally, long after the others, crossed the line'. Incidentally, it was at that point that I realised that one of the best ways to get out of games was to become a timekeeper.

Yes, I was no good at sport. Nor did I achieve anything very much in the school, apart from my academic studies. Only in my final term was I made a House Captain, presumably to enhance my school record when I put in for University

entrance. Nor did I become a sacristan. And I held no posts in any of the college societies.

And yet my time at Lancing was an enjoyable one. I could thank my stars that my parents had, completely fortuitously, chosen this school, with its tolerance, even towards such abysmal failures at sport as myself – so different from so many schools that they might have chosen. A school which encouraged whatever interests one had – artistic, musical, literary, religious, political - and thus made life worthwhile.

But enough of me! I'm probably beginning to sound like Evelyn Waugh's ancient bishop. What I propose to do is devote the first part of this lecture to Evelyn Waugh's Lancing diaries, and their interest for us OLS from later generations; and then devote the second half to some lessons we can learn from them in relation to his eventual literary output. I'd like to give it the title 'the Devil's in the Detail'.

First, the diaries. It is very rare for an author to leave substantial diaries from his schooldays. Authors are very good at writing memoirs and autobiographies, of course, but these, written after the event, necessarily involve a reordering of reality, a rearrangement of things in order to make sense of them. Diaries, on the other hand, are a first-hand account of things as they actually happened day by day – unless the diaries are being consciously written for eventual publication, like the diary of the Goncourt brothers – in which case, as with memoirs, we have to beware.

Evelyn Waugh's diaries, however, were clearly written without thought for publication. There is no attempt in them to rewrite history, or to make himself seem better than he was. Years later, in 1945, Waugh wrote 'Yesterday I read my Lancing diaries through with unmixed shame... The damning evidence is there, in sentence after sentence on page after page, of consistent caddishness... If what I wrote is a true account of myself, I was conceited, heartless and cautiously malevolent.' This is, of

course, the adult who is speaking. The schoolboy Waugh was neither better nor worse than his contemporaries. Several years later, in 1956, writing to his son Auberon, who was extremely unhappy at Downside, Waugh produced yet another gloss on his schooldays, in an interpretation whereby his behaviour at school was based on his adolescent unhappiness: ‘The only honest answer to your letter’, he wrote, ‘is this: growing up is a disagreeable process for most men. You have to grow up somewhere... In the hope of understanding you better I have been reading the diaries I kept at your age. I am appalled at what an odious prig I was. My consolations at Lancing seem to have been debating, ragging the OTC, intriguing for advancement, atheism and over-eating.’

Waugh’s fragment of autobiography, *A Little Learning*, published in 1964, is, when it deals with Lancing, a ‘tidying-up’ of the facts as related in the diaries. As such, it is far more satisfactory than them as a piece of literature, and far more readable and interesting to the general reader; but we are continually aware that the author is speaking with hindsight. This of course has its advantages. The pen-portrait of the flamboyant master J.F. Roxburgh, for example, is rounded in a way of which the schoolboy would have been incapable, limited as his vision of Roxburgh necessarily was. It has, however, drawbacks, as when he questions the statements made by his younger self as ‘stark nonsense’, or as having ‘no sincerity in any of this’.

The diaries are different. They are not worth reading as literature, and the general public will not necessarily get there anything of value for an assessment of Evelyn Waugh as an author. But they do give a true account of how a schoolboy views both his own situation and the school he is in. For us, who are specifically interested in Lancing, they are a very rich mine of information, containing minor

details which, though naturally ignored by the later memoir-writer as being of no importance, can be treasured by us.

My own generation can find things in them of particular interest. When I first read the diaries, I considered Waugh's Lancing as being vastly distant from my time here. But I now realise that there were only 30 years in it, and that that is small compared with the 60 years between my own time at Lancing in the 1950s and now. So it is, that a good number of figures that appear in Waugh's diaries were still at Lancing when I was here. E.B. Gordon, Housemaster of Seconds, for example, whose nickname of 'Cat' or 'Pussy' derived, I now gathered, from the nickname given to him when he was House Tutor of Heads in Waugh's time. There he was called 'Super-spy' or 'Pussy-foot', because of his inquisitive nature. And then there was our Maths teacher, Puttock, already being ragged in class; there was Howitt, the 'emaciated young clergyman' who had come to Lancing temporarily, said Waugh, to recuperate from a breakdown in health in the inner city, but who was still here thirty years on; there was Parnell Smith, later to be so brilliantly described in Ken Shearwood's book; and so on. I myself was delighted to find several mentions of a local landowner from my part of Wales, Sir Hugo Boothby of Fonmon Castle, who was a contemporary of Waugh's in Head's House, and whom Waugh described as 'the bumptious Boothby'.

In our time at Lancing in the 1950s, however, the shadow of someone who had left the school long ago still remained. J. F. Roxburgh had left Lancing in 1923 to found Stowe School as its first Headmaster, but this charismatic man had profoundly marked two of the most prominent masters at Lancing in the 1950s, who had been boys here under him. Monkey Chamberlin and Basil Handford both echoed, in aspects of their dress, something of his dandyism – the silk handkerchiefs in the top pocket,

the bow ties – and in their activities echoed also something of his idiosyncrasies – the careful rituals of the preparation of mingled teas of the type of Lapsang Souchong and Orange Pekoe, and so on. They shared, too, his ability to remember by name every boy in the school. And Handford, in particular, invested his classes with the same excitement that Roxburgh gave, as described by Waugh: ‘While some masters were content to sit as invigilators while their sleepy forms turned the pages of textbooks, or at best to dictate notes from yellowing sheafs, J.F. appeared always jaunty and fresh as a leading actor on the boards, in the limelight, commanding complete attention. He never gave the impression of performing a routine task.’

The diaries also give us a glimpse of some of the enduring characteristics which continue at Lancing from generation to generation. Nothing is new under the sun, and when we hear of the ‘bolshie’ qualities of the generation of the 1960s, as described in David Hare’s play *South Downs*, we are immediately reminded of Waugh’s generation. Even the subjects proposed for the Debating Society by Waugh’s group in 1920 are just as provocative as those proposed in Hare’s play, the only difference being the contemporary targets. In the Twenties, there were motions praising Lenin, calling for a Labour government, declaring disbelief in the immortality of the soul, and attacking the view of ‘parsons and politicians’ that the war had been worthwhile. In their day, these were even more shocking than Hare’s hero’s comparatively platitudinous calls for everything to be abolished – nuclear weapons, the monarchy, the public schools. My own experience from the 1950s, was that similar iconoclasm existed – for example, on the part of my colleague in the Modern Language Sixth, Kit Lambert (later the manager of ‘The Who’), who infected our little class with his witty, subversive enthusiasm. But most of us were probably far more staid than either Waugh’s or Hare’s contemporaries. When we seemed too staid,

however, the masters tended to take up the baton, such as Handford, whom I remember shocking us with his espousal of some of the most extreme doctrines of Marxist socialism.

In 1929, in an article in *The Spectator*, Evelyn Waugh, in one of the multiple poses that he took on during the course of his life, was already taking on the role of an ‘young fogey’. In this role he now derided what he saw as the ‘half-boiled’ attitudes of the masters who had taught him on their return from the war, like Roxburgh: ‘They returned’, he wrote, ‘with a jolly tolerance of everything that seemed “modern”. Every effort was made to encourage the children to “think for themselves”. When they should have been whipped and taught Greek paradigms, they were set arguing about birth control and nationalisation. Their crude little opinions were treated with respect. Preachers in the school chapel week by week entrusted the future to their hands. It is hardly surprising that they were Bolshevik at eighteen and bored at twenty.’

Waugh here was turning his back on what he had valued at the time, and what has been a lasting characteristic of Lancing life. Lancing has always been, I think, unlike most other public schools. In those other schools, the watchword appears to have been, and often still is, ‘conformism’. Boys were, and are, expected to conform to a pattern. Here, there has been no such imperative. Boys, and now girls, are encouraged to think, and not to accept the established truths. And they were taught, in my time and in Waugh’s, by an array of idiosyncratic, eccentric masters: In my time there was ‘Tiger’ Halsey, with his visual acting-out of events from history, (such as the massively tall, epileptic figure of Peter the Great supervising the building of the shipyards at St Petersburg – for which he had to stand on top of his desk, his face contorted and his arms flailing). Then there was ‘Monkey’ Chamberlin’ with his famous ‘monkey cry’, and of course the assistant chaplain, Henry Thorold, a ‘squire-

parson' whose aristocratic manners and eccentricities concealed a warm and understanding priest. Come to think of it, Lancing has excelled in eccentric assistant chaplains, from Howitt to Thorold, and then on to the assistant chaplain in my son Dominic's time at Lancing, Father Hunwicke. And then there were the games masters. I'm sure Ken Shearwood wouldn't mind being called an eccentric – an inspired and inspiring eccentric. And he has his place in a long line. One of my favourite figures is someone who taught here for only ten years, in the Thirties, before going on to Charterhouse: Bob Arrowsmith, who in his loud voice would produce the most embarrassing statements, often couched in cricketing terminology. Thus, when at a match one Saturday he met a recent Old Boy who, as Old Boys tend to, had brought a girlfriend with him to show off to his former fellow-pupils, Arrowsmith greeted him with the loud words; 'Hullo! Married, engaged, or just having a net?' Arrowsmith had a dog he called Larwood, and when asked why he called him that, replied; 'because he's got four short legs and his balls swing in from the off.'

Eccentric many of these men may have been, but most of them were very good teachers. There were still, of course, in both Waugh's time and mine, masters who just spent their time dictating notes to their classes. But most of the teachers were inspiring. In my own subject, French, Peter Thompson and Bernard Fielding both encouraged original thought in relation to the literature we read, and also a proper command of the spoken language – the latter being rare in schools in those days. (I remember my brother, when he set about teaching French by the direct method at Charterhouse, being informed by one of his colleagues: 'Griffiths, French is a dead language and should be taught as such'). But some of the greatest insights I received were from masters in other subjects, in particular Basil Handford, with his dramatic and exciting teaching both of English Literature and of Latin, and Donald Bancroft,

with all the insights he gave us into English literature as a living thing. Thanks to them, I spent a large part of my vacations reading not French literature but English.

The important thing was that such people encouraged their pupils to develop whatever skills, artistic or other, that they possessed. Evelyn Waugh describes how E.B. Gordon encouraged him in his interest in producing illuminated script, to the extent of putting him in touch with the illuminator Francis Crease, and how Roxburgh praised and encouraged his youthful writings.. In more recent times, many other incipient authors have been similarly encouraged, as we can see from the products of the ‘golden age’ of the 1960s, with such figures as Tim Rice, David Hare and Christopher Hampton. In my own time, the 1950s, musicians seem to have been at the fore, with the Bedford brothers starting their brilliant careers. And for those, like myself, who had no creative talent, great opportunities were provided for appreciation of music and the other arts – visiting concerts at the Dome in Brighton, listening to the gramophones of masters such as John Alston, Bernard Fielding or Christopher Chamberlin, reading a part in the Shakespeare Society, or taking part in one or other of the small societies which flourished – including, from 1952 onwards , the new society The Elizabethans, founded at the accession of Queen Elizabeth II to the throne.

Evelyn Waugh, surrounded by such figures as Roger Fulford, Tom Driberg and Max Mallowan, declared ‘The more I see of Lancing, the more convinced I become of the fact that our generation was a very exceptional one.’ Later generations have felt much the same.

\*

And now I want to turn to the second half of my talk. What, if anything, do Evelyn Waugh’s Lancing diaries tell us about his later literary output? The first and most



obvious lesson is a negative one. Shortly after the appearance of *Brideshead Revisited* in 1945, Waugh decided to write a novel based on his school diaries. Years later, in 1970, a small fragment of that projected work was found in old files at Waugh's literary agent's office. It was to be called *Charles Ryder's Schooldays*, the central character, clearly based on Waugh himself, being also the future narrator of *Brideshead Revisited*. Part of the aim of this work seems to have been to fill in the middle-class background of this character, as a kind of 'prequel' for *Brideshead*.

What we find, in this fragment, is a very close following of Waugh's diaries, often with merely names being changed. The hero, Ryder, is himself keeping a diary, which is quoted from as an accompaniment to the action. The effect is not particularly engaging to the general reader (however much, like the diaries, it could appeal to us OLs), and it is hardly surprising that this highly unsatisfactory text should have remained in the agent's bottom drawer (though of course, as always happens, after its discovery, after Waugh's death, it was in fact published. I think Waugh would have been shocked at this).

Why is it so unsatisfactory? I think it shares the faults of so many novels and plays in which an author tries to recapture some of his own experiences of school life. I remember at one stage, when I did a certain amount of reading of manuscripts for publishers, having to grapple with a couple of very dreary examples of this genre. The danger is that of getting caught up in the detail of one's own past experience, which becomes more important than anything else, to the detriment of shape of plot, and of coherence of theme. A novel, or a play, has to have a different kind of aim from diaries, and to say something more. What we have here is a vast series of details, which appear to be there purely for their own sake. As I said at the beginning of this talk, 'The Devil is in the detail'.

This gives us a lesson in relation to his other works, however. There, only too often, ‘the devil is in the detail’ as well. But there that is usually because of failings in the reader, rather than in the novelist. Because Waugh is such a consummate painter of the *mores* of his age, because his depiction of episodes from his own experience (often, in the earlier works, wildly exaggerated and fantasised) are so gripping, and often so funny, only too often the average reader looks no further. Yet there is always, in Waugh’s best work, a series of underlying themes for which these details are merely the backdrop.

Even in the early works this is so. On the basis of their enjoyment of Waugh’s satirical skills, many critics drew the conclusion that Waugh was not equipped to undertake anything more serious. Sean O’Faolain’s judgment of him sums all this up: ‘Waugh is a writer of pure brainless genius, which he has amplified by the possession or development of enormous technical skill.’ ‘Brainless genius’! This non-comprehension by many critics, and by many readers, comes out even more clearly in their reactions to Waugh’s later novels, those on religious themes, written after his conversion to Roman Catholicism. For many people who read *Brideshead Revisited*, the depiction of the glittering life of Oxford undergraduates in the 1920s, and of the landed aristocracy in the same era, appears to be the main theme of this book, to the extent that ‘The Brideshead Generation’ has become a kind of shorthand for it. It is as though such people see this book as merely being a continuation of the social observation found in early novels like *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*. Waugh himself, when he went to Hollywood in 1947 to discuss a film version of the novel, noted that the writer adapting it for the screen saw it ‘purely as a love story’.

In the case of *Brideshead*, and of the other Catholic works, there is however a further element of misunderstanding. This is the reaction of Catholic readers, because

Waugh consciously uses the detailed paraphernalia that had been used by English Catholic novelists over the years – people like R.H. Benson, Mrs Wilfrid Ward, and Maurice Baring. These themes include that of the Catholic aristocracy, and of the romanticism of recusancy – what one critic has described as ‘Catholic chic’. This fits in, of course, with the persona which Waugh himself had by now taken on in his own life, perfecting it like a work of art – the persona of an arrant snob. Another such theme was that of great Catholic houses, often marked, in the novels of Ward, Benson and Baring by the chapel in which the sanctuary lamp is burning, a source of nostalgia whose extinction marks a sense of loss.

More important themes also stem from the Catholic literary tradition. For example, the conflict between Catholic duty and desire, which was a stock-in-trade of what were known as ‘Catholic novels of renunciation’, is clearly the basis for Julia’s own act of renunciation. And the theme of the apparent wastrel ending up, like Charles de Foucauld in Jerusalem immediately after his conversion, as a humble doorkeeper in the house of the Lord, is closely followed in Sebastian’s acceptance as ‘a sort of under-porter in a monastery in North Africa’, bereft of everything, even dignity, but at the same time being seen as ‘holy’..

On the surface, therefore, some of the critics of Waugh’s Catholic works would appear justified in their criticisms. These criticisms include the following: ‘a religious theme given institutional treatment is always liable to get lost in the embroidered folds of ecclesiasticism.’

But, just as Waugh had misled the readers of his early novels by the social detail of his descriptions, so here he was misleading his Catholic readers in the same way. The traditional Catholic novel had been far too clear in its message, to the extent that only too often it descended into banality. Waugh, reacting strongly against

this, gradually reveals a more subtle message to us through hints and nudges, and at the same time subverts the expectations aroused by his use of the traditional themes.

Sadly, I haven't time to go into it all here; but one of the best examples of this technique is the gradual realisation on the part of the reader that, amid what Waugh later described as 'the operation of divine grace on a group of diverse but closely connected characters', the most important 'operation of grace' is taking place surreptitiously, during the course of the novel, upon the narrator himself.

Evelyn Waugh's achievement in *Brideshead* was immense. He transformed the characteristics of the traditional Catholic novel, and made of it something subtle, effective, and at times moving. *Brideshead* places him at the forefront of modern Catholic novelists, alongside his contemporaries Mauriac, Bernanos, and Graham Greene, all of whom like him converted the moribund techniques of an outdated form into a series of modern psychological dramas.

And yet the misconceptions about Waugh continued in relation to his later books. Critics, and readers, still tended to be misled by detail – whether autobiographical or religious. My old friend Maurice Cowling, for example, dismissed the *Sword of Honour* trilogy, from a religious point of view, as being 'deserted', and as merely containing 'polemical statements and celebrations of Catholicism'. Here he, like many others, had again been misled by the 'detail'. Some have seen the trilogy's main, and only, theme, as being Waugh's own war experiences, and his own disillusionment as the war carried on (and there is no denying that this is one of its major themes, with Guy Crouchback being in that sense a spokesman for Waugh himself). But what of the religious theme? Here, even Catholic critics have been misled by the surface unimportance, and infrequency, of most of the mentions of religion, which mainly take two forms: various acts of religious conformity performed

by Guy himself, and the recusant romanticism of Guy's family, with Guy's father having leased the family home to a convent so that 'the sanctuary lamp still burned at Broome as of old'. All these seem strangely disconnected from the plot, and people can be forgiven for thinking that these merely stand on their own, as irrelevant details added at random. But they are the backdrop for a spiritual drama that is hidden behind all the detail. They are there to remind us of Guy's religious basis for belief and action, and to provide the ultimate message of the novel. Towards the end, Guy, who no longer sees the war as the opportunity for heroic redemption of his wasted life, finds a humbler and more unexpected way to do something of use. At his father's funeral, we are told, 'in the recesses of Guy's conscience there lay the belief that somewhere, somehow, something would be required of him; that he must be attentive to the summons when it came... One day he would get the chance to do some small service which only he could perform, for which he had been created.' And he wonders whether his father is at that moment clearing the way for him. 'Show me what to do and help me to do it', he prays. The task, when it comes, is an apparently unheroic one. His divorced wife is expecting a baby by Trimmer, the working-class cad and coward who stands for all that Guy, and Waugh himself, dislike in the modern world. And she is destitute. Guy asks her to remarry him. Arguing with a mutual friend, he gives his reason: 'You see there's another —' he was going to say 'soul'; then realised that this word would mean little... 'there's another life to consider. What sort of life do you think the child would have, born unwanted in 1944?' We now realise that his father *had* cleared the way for Guy. In his last letter to him, talking about the results of the Lateran Treaty, he had said: 'Quantitative judgements don't apply. If only one soul was saved that is full compensation for any loss of "face".'

So the true message of *Sword of Honour* is not one of futility and disillusionment, as it is so often seen. Hidden within it is the message that there is always something to be done, always a way to be useful, and that true 'honour' does not have to be that of the sword, but can be almost ludicrous in its simplicity and humility. It is a message that the pride in family history and continuity, so prominent in Guy's family, and in the romantic recusant tradition which so many people see as part of Waugh's make-up, can be subordinated to the saving of one soul (however much 'loss of face' is involved), so that the cad Trimmer's child becomes the heir to the great Catholic family house. Waugh here uses the conventions of traditional Catholicism in order to overturn them in the interest of a different order.

I suppose I have been talking, today, about the difference between appearance and reality, between truth and art. Evelyn Waugh, who so often seems to have attempted to make his own life into a work of fiction in its own right, and who could take on different *personae* at will, stands as a particularly good subject for such study. His time at Lancing was no different. He himself later commented on the element of play-acting on the part of him and his contemporaries. I would like to end with a good example of the kind of 'pinch of salt' with which the masters took such activities.

As Waugh later told his son Auberon, atheism was one of his 'consolations' at Lancing, together with overeating. He was a sacristan, however, and debated with himself the propriety of his position. One Saturday, preparing the altar with his fellow-sacristan Tom Driberg, he revealed to him the discovery that there was no God. Driberg was shocked, and said that in that case he should not be handling the altar cloth. Thereupon Waugh made an appointment with the chaplain to discuss the matter. But when he got to the chaplain's room there was another master sitting smoking with him. Waugh had to discuss his predicament in front of this other person.

As he later put it: ‘Adolescent doubts are very tedious to the mature; I was genially assured that it was quite in order for an atheist to act as sacristan.’

I must tell that story to Richard Dawkins!