

# EVELYN WAUGH - an A-Z

By WILLIAM BOYD

My first introduction to Evelyn Waugh was shortly after his death in 1966. I had just turned 14 and was at a boarding school in Scotland. Some enterprising 6th former got up a petition that he was planning to send to the headmaster. The petition demanded that a half-holiday be granted to commemorate the passing of the “great English novelist Evelyn Waugh.” I remember eagerly signing my name though I had no idea who this Evelyn Waugh was – but I was very keen on a half-holiday. I think over a hundred signatures were gathered and it was duly presented to the headmaster. It was rejected forthwith. However, it stimulated my interest in Waugh and thus was born a near life-long obsession with the work and the man. I am pretty sure I have read almost everything that Waugh wrote that was published. I’ve written about him a great deal. He appears briefly as a character in my novel *Any Human Heart* and I have adapted four of his novels for television – *Scoop* and the *Sword of Honour* trilogy (of which more later). Consequently, when I was asked if I would give this lecture I was in something of a quandary; what on earth could I talk about? I could talk about almost anything to do with Evelyn Waugh. By serendipitous chance an OL came to my rescue. I happen to know the playwright David Hare and I told him I was going to give the Evelyn Waugh lecture at Lancing but I had no idea what to talk about. “Why don’t you do one of your “A to Zeds?”, David suggested. In fact I’ve often used the alphabet as a way of writing about writers and artists – it’s amazing how, simply by following the letters, you manage to get a whole lot more in than a more orthodox paper seems to allow. There are problems – some letters pose more difficulties than others and the strain shows, somewhat. I’m sure you’ll spot them but this is the object of the exercise. Following the alphabet requires some deformation in your undertaking – but you can arrive at some interesting contortions. So this is what I decided to do – thanks to David Hare – and so here is my A–Z of Evelyn Waugh.

**A – is for Arthur and Alec.** Arthur and Alec Waugh, that is – father and older brother. Evelyn Waugh had a complicated relationship with his father and elder sibling. Arthur Waugh was a genial man, a publisher of some renown, but his son, Evelyn, saw him almost as a kind of Dickensian character, a throwback to Victorian times, and was a little ashamed of him. Arthur’s problem, such as it was, was that he absolutely doted on his eldest son, Alec, and Evelyn was regarded almost as an afterthought. Evelyn sensed this rapturous love his father held for Alec at a very early age and I find myself asking – being an armchair psychiatrist – if this wasn’t the source of many of the characteristics and eccentricities that Evelyn exhibited in later life. It must be very odd as a young child to know that your father loves you significantly less than your brother particularly when you haven’t done anything to provoke this indifference. Arthur made no attempt at all to hide his preference. It was a kind of platonic father-son love affair. Alec was a star at cricket at his school, Sherborne, and while at Sherborne he wrote and published a scandalous novel about homosexual love amongst adolescent schoolboys called “*The Loom of Youth*” and was expelled. This scandal made it impossible for Evelyn to follow his brother to Sherborne – which is why he was sent here, to Lancing. (Every cloud has a silver lining). Alec joined the army when war broke out, was captured and after the war became a hack novelist. His younger brother eclipsed him fairly swiftly in the literary stakes but this never seemed to bother Alec – he seemed to have been a very easy-going man. Evelyn, though he and Alec got on fairly well, I think it’s fair to say, never really loved his brother – probably because of Arthur’s unashamed and obvious favouritism.

**B – is for Brideshead.** Without doubt Evelyn Waugh’s most famous novel whose success when it was published in 1944, particularly in America, generated huge sales and huge sums of money. It has further lived on in the public mind as a result of the famous TV adaptation in the 1980s and a subsequent film. It’s not my favourite, I have to say, and I think Evelyn Waugh had his doubts about it too. He very heavily revised the second edition – he saw it as overwrought, overwritten, almost too lush and romantic. For Waugh fanatics like me it’s interesting as it provides a kind of lens through which to examine EW’s own “homosexuality” in his life. While he was at Oxford and for a few years

later Waugh went through an intense homosexual phase. He had an affair with a close friend called Alistair Graham (a model for Sebastian Flyte in *Brideshead*). In the novel it's all very subtextual but I think you can – through close reading – establish that there was a physical love affair between Charles Ryder and Sebastian. Waugh, it should be said, was a very autobiographical writer. Much of his fiction, however grotesque, outlandish and blackly comic, has its roots clearly in his own life. *Brideshead* is no exception.

**C – is for comedy.** To my mind Waugh is a comic genius – with a particular gift for ruthless black comedy. One of the reasons I don't like *Brideshead* is that it's not very funny. It takes itself too seriously. It's a rather unfashionable view, mine – in that Waugh's "serious" novels – *Brideshead*, *A Handful of Dust*, the *Sword of Honour* Trilogy – are generally considered his masterworks. I disagree: I think his particular genius flourished in the early comedies – *Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies*, *Black Mischief* and – his real masterpiece, so I claim – *Scoop*. *Scoop* is a perfect comic novel, I believe (if a novel can ever be perfect) and contains possibly the funniest chapter in the whole of English literature (when Mr Salter, the foreign editor of *The Daily Beast*, goes to visit the hero, William Boot, at his family home, Boot Magna, in the depths of the English countryside). Those four comic novels, I would argue, are Waugh's true legacy – in these novels his unique voice and vision are clear. The more 'serious' works are flawed and uneven, as if the author is wearing borrowed clothes.

**D – is for Dudley, Dudley Carew.** Dudley Carew was a contemporary of Evelyn Waugh here at Lancing [1917-1921]. At school they were very close – or at least Carew believed they were close. Carew became a distinguished sports writer – cricket was his game – and he wrote a few novels. The two saw little of each other after school and Oxford. But when Waugh came to write his first volume of his autobiography, *A Little Learning*, that dealt with his schooldays and his Oxford undergraduate years, the pen-portrait he painted of Dudley Carew was not flattering. Carew was mortally hurt by what he saw as a betrayal – and he wrote to Waugh, complaining. Waugh, then in the final years of his life didn't care. Carew, however, wouldn't leave it like that. He wrote a bitter book in reply called *Fragment of a Friendship* where he told the story of their schoolboy relationship through his eyes, setting the record straight. The two books make a very intriguing double memoir, in fact, and a fascinating two-sided picture of Waugh's schooldays here emerge. But in fact the most extraordinary document about Lancing and Evelyn Waugh appeared posthumously with the publication of Waugh's diary that he kept while a schoolboy. Again, I think this is unique – no novelist of Waugh's stature has recorded his adolescent years with such precocious and gimlet-eyed accuracy. The book is absolutely fascinating, and too little known. When you read the Lancing diaries you know that this boy was destined for great things. It's an unprecedented and astonishingly mature portrait of the adolescent mind in all its cruelty, brutal self-examination, affected disdain and sentimental passion.

**E – is for Evelyn.** But not Evelyn Waugh but Evelyn Gardner, Waugh's first wife. Why did Waugh marry Evelyn – always known as "She-Evelyn" to distinguish her? I think it was possibly because he was on the rebound from his homosexual affair with Alistair Graham – that phase in his life was ending – and also because it was the beginnings of what we might term – in short hand – as Waugh's social climbing. His snobbery (a thorny subject). She-Evelyn was slim, blond and gamine – very like Waugh himself at the time when they met. She was the "honourable" Evelyn Gardner, daughter of a politician and peer, Lord Burghclere. An "it" girl of the 1920s. It was something of a whirlwind romance, followed by a grand society wedding, but it very quickly ended. Again, playing the armchair psychiatrist, I see in the collapse of Waugh's first marriage a key to so much of his subsequent behaviour. She-Evelyn had an affair, shortly after the marriage, with a handsome, tall Old Etonian who worked for the BBC called John Heygate. Waugh's shame and humiliation was absolute and profound. Divorce was a very public matter in those days – everybody gossiped about the collapse of the marriage. I don't think Waugh ever really got over it. His attitudes became perverse and frozen, his personality hardened and the divorce drove him – willingly – into the arms

of the Catholic church. It's not too much of an exaggeration to say that after the collapse of his first marriage in 1930 he became a different person.

**F – is for “fighting” and Fitzroy.** Fitzroy Maclean – Scottish aristocrat, soldier, diplomat and famous traveller. Part of the change that took place in Waugh was that he ceased to care how he was perceived – he didn't worry about giving offence, being disliked, starting a feud. When it came to warfare – the Second World War – everybody agrees that Waugh showed conspicuous bravery under fire – particularly in Crete in 1941. I happened to meet Fitzroy Maclean in the 1980s – he was an elderly man – and knowing that he had known Waugh in the Second World War I asked him what he had made of him. Maclean said candidly he had never met an officer more detested by the men who served under him. To such an extent that he wondered if, when in battle, Waugh might even have been shot in the back by the men he commanded, so hated was he. Now, Waugh and Maclean had been feuding for years so Fitzroy wasn't going to pull any punches but it was an interesting insight. Waugh was desperate to join the army when war began but found it very hard – he was elderly by soldier's standards (mid thirties) but he was not popular. He was seen as “difficult”. His military career was blighted by the enemies he made and the antagonisms he provoked in others. Evelyn Waugh had a very difficult war. His experiences in World War 2 made him very bitter.

**G – is for God.** It's quite interesting to consider the famous 20th century British novelists who converted to Catholicism. Waugh, Graham Greene and Muriel Spark. All of them did so for their own reasons but I've always suspected Greene and Spark for being a bit bogus. I remember meeting Anthony Burgess – who was born a catholic – and he had the cradle-Catholic's suspicion of the convert and the convert's zeal: he was particularly derisive about Graham Greene's faith. I don't think in later life Greene or Spark were at all sincere in their Catholicism but I do believe Waugh was. His worldly friends were somewhat baffled by his devoutness. He once said to Nancy Mitford (I paraphrase): “you have no idea how horrible a person I would be if I didn't have my faith.” Initially, I think Catholicism offered Waugh an escape and refuge from the public humiliations of his failed first marriage. Later in life it acted as a kind of safety net – or something he could cling to that laid down rules and strictures that he had to abide by. You could argue that it didn't soften him or sweeten him in any way – he was as rude and abrupt a person as you could imagine, despite his love of God. But his faith gave his life some meaning – and he romanticised it and revelled in it. He became more royalist than the king, as the saying has it. To a non-believer there is something absurd and ridiculous about Waugh's devotion to the Catholic faith. How could such a sharp, clever, cold and calculating mind embrace these nonsensical ancient doctrines? But it was exactly that opposition – that contradiction – that he needed. Illogical belief kept him sane, paradoxically.

**H – is for Handful.** *A Handful of Dust*. This novel is often held up as Waugh's greatest achievement. I disagree. In fact I've written a long introduction to the Everyman edition of the book detailing how profoundly I disagree. To my mind this novel is still part of the fall-out from the disastrous marriage to She-Evelyn. I read it as a protracted act of revenge on his first wife. It is the story of an honourable man, something of a fuddy-duddy and traditionalist, who is betrayed by a vapid, selfish, flighty wife – who has an affair with a despicable sleazy opportunist – to such an extent that she cares more about her lover than she does her little son. There are many other aspects to the novel, of course, but I believe this is the essential narrative motor. Waugh immortalised Evelyn Gardner by painting “Brenda Last” in the darkest and most derogatory colours. Looked at in this light it's a potent illustration of how deep the wound of his betrayal was. Written years later it proves that Waugh never really got over the collapse of that marriage.

**I – is for Ian, Ian Fleming.** Everyone knows that Ian Fleming invented James Bond but I never knew until much later in my Waugh obsession that Fleming and Waugh knew each other really quite well. They met through Fleming's wife, Ann – one of Waugh's close women friends. Because Waugh liked Ann he had, perforce, to see Ian. And I think they cordially detested each other. It's interesting that Waugh's most intense friendships were with women – clever, funny women. Fleming, another

diffident, aristocratic, Old Etonian Scot wasn't Waugh's cup of tea at all. And yet, I see a lot in common between the two men. They are a very interesting type of English writer and English man. Both were highly successful writers with different reputations; both were famous and had done very well from writing in all manner of ways. And yet both men had a kind of death wish. They were profoundly unhappy people – and both actually wanted to die but weren't going to actively commit suicide. And so, I believe, they set about committing a form of slow suicide by drinking, smoking and drugging themselves (with what we would call prescription drugs today) to an early grave. In their middle age both Waugh and Fleming were massive drinkers. Waugh would start drinking gin and orange squash at around 10.30 in the morning as he did the Times crossword and carry on drinking – and smoking cigars – all day. Fleming smoked 80 cigarettes a day and probably drank two bottles of vodka a day. Both men needed powerful sleeping draughts to make them sleep at night and both, on occasion, needed amphetamines to get them going in the morning. Waugh, also, was obese. In their fifties both men were physical wrecks. But they got their death wish: Fleming died aged 56, Waugh aged 62. Both at the height of their fame and renown.

**J – is for Jungman.** Teresa Jungman – always known as “Baby” Jungman – the great unrequited love of Evelyn Waugh's life. She and her older sister Zita were part of that set known as the “Bright Young Things” of the 1920s. Waugh was obsessed with her – she was very beautiful, flighty and a devout Catholic. He proposed marriage to her and she rejected him instantly. When asked about this later in life she simply said he was “not my type”. She died in 2010 aged 102. A huge cache of love letters from Waugh written to her as he pursued his ardent wooing has been discovered and will be published in the forthcoming “Collected Works”. Reputedly they reveal a tender, lovelorn, romantic side to Evelyn Waugh. Not adjectives that one normally associates with the man and his personality.

**K – is for Kids.** In fact Waugh's relationship with his second wife Laura and his many children is fascinating. Why did Waugh marry Laura in 1937 – a plain, unlitrary, aristocratic girl? She was 20 he was 33. Snobbery? The thought that it was time he married and had a family? Laura was pregnant every year from 1937-46. To his children Waugh appeared a remote and often frightening figure as a father. He said he wasn't remotely interested in his children until they “attained the age of reason”, whenever that might be. When his son Auberon was severely wounded in an accident while serving in the army Waugh appeared frequently at his bedside as he convalesced. Bron wrote later: “that about this time I began to be quite fond of my father, never having liked him much in childhood or early youth.”

**L – is for Laycock, Bob Laycock.** Waugh's commanding officer during part of the war and something of a protector and idol. Waugh revered Laycock as a soldier-hero – Eton, Sandhurst and the Guards, of course. I was involved in an amicable literary-academic spat about Laycock and Waugh and their behaviour during the debacle that was the Battle for Crete in 1941. It was generally believed that Waugh and Laycock disobeyed orders to stay on Crete with their commando rearguard and somehow smuggled themselves illicitly on to a departing destroyer. This episode is put in the Sword of Honour trilogy, thinly disguised, where the character “Ivor Claire” does exactly what Waugh and Laycock did and abscond from Crete. When the book appeared this was the gossip in London's smart set. Ann Fleming sent Waugh an amused telegram identifying Claire with Laycock. Waugh exploded with rage – disingenuously, I believe – and the matter nearly ended their friendship. For me the fact that this was the prevailing chit-chat at the time in Waugh's social circle was overwhelming evidence but one of Waugh's editors profoundly disagreed. Articles were written and we had a to and fro of forensic letters each advancing the other side of the argument. We eventually stopped, honours-even. But I still think Waugh's over-the-top false outrage expressed to Ann Fleming is the great giveaway. There is more evidence in his journals. Waugh was both profoundly ashamed that he'd slipped away from Crete and too honest a writer not to deal with the issue some way in his fiction.

**M – is for Muriel, Muriel Spark.** Along with Waugh, Muriel Spark is one of my favourite novelists. Interestingly, Waugh was captivated by her early novels and – most unusually for him – happily gave her pre-publication quotes. Spark was a converted catholic like Waugh and like him she had suffered from drug-induced hallucinations. Spark took amphetamines to lose weight – she wrote about her experience in her first novel, *The Comforters*. Waugh did the same in his novel *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, of which more later. My own feeling is that Waugh saw in Spark's work the same sense of humour operating, very similar to his own – very cool, unemotional and often cruel.

**N – is for Nancy, Nancy Mitford.** Nancy Mitford was perhaps Waugh's closest woman friend (along with Ann Fleming, Pamela Berry and Diana Cooper) and their long correspondence is both stimulating and revealing. Nancy was a clever, funny, confident county aristocrat who came from a remarkable family – and, later in life, also a very successful writer. In many respects they were chalk and cheese in their tastes. But their shared intelligence drew them together – though Nancy was very shrewd about the darker complexities of Waugh's character. They often fell out – particularly over France and Nancy's francophilia – and she could not really understand Waugh's blind faith in his religious devotions.

**O – is for Oxford.** I think Oxford – if one can talk so generally about a place – is still viewed through the lens of Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. Particularly by undergraduates. It's very easy to be seduced by the place and its myths – and *Brideshead Revisited* is one of the most potent myths. I lived in Oxford and studied and taught at the university for eight years – during which time the famous TV adaptation of the novel was screened (and which I reviewed at great length and rather unfavourably in the *New Statesman* where I was TV critic at the time). Immediately one saw undergraduates carrying teddy bears around with them, or singing arias from operas at the top of their voice as they bicycled through town, or being flamboyantly “aesthetic” in their clothes and attitudes like the character Anthony Blanche. The *Brideshead* effect is like a kind of drug – or at least it was in my day – it makes you think Oxford is the centre of the universe instead of simply being a middle-sized provincial town an hour away from London. I used to imagine Evelyn Waugh spinning in his grave.

**P – is for Pinfold.** Gilbert Pinfold, eponymous character in the novel that bears his name: *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*. It's a most fascinating novel in the Waugh canon. Waugh, as I've mentioned, was taking vast amounts of chloral hydrate and bromide as a sedative to help him sleep and deal with his increasingly decrepit health. In 1953 he went on a long voyage of Colombo, in the then Ceylon – he liked to escape English winters. On the voyage he began to suffer from persecution mania. He thought he was being followed, that his cabin was bugged – he kept hearing voices that abused him in the most explicit and vile terms. He was sent home and the cause was discovered to be a kind of poisoning from the bromide he was taking. He had gone mad for a few days. Typical Waugh, it became the material for a novel – which more or less recounts the events of the voyage as he experienced them. *Gilbert Pinfold* is a remarkable self-portrait of the novelist at that time of his life. What is astonishing is Waugh's pre-emptive strike on himself. He knew how he was thought of by his enemies and he knew all their slights and aspersions. He documents all these flaws in *Pinfold*: a social-climber, a snob, a crypto-homosexual, a fascist, a sucker-up to aristocrats, offensive, rude and so on. In a funny way it was the best form of defence – no one could effectively attack Waugh again. He had got his own retaliation in first.

**Q – is for Quennell, Peter Quennell.** I mentioned enemies. Many of Waugh's so-called friends and associates were also his enemies. He used them as whipping-boys for his scarifying wit. Peter Quennell was a favourite target – a contemporary, a man of letters, tall, handsome a great womaniser – he was everything Waugh wasn't. Cyril Connolly was another. Cyril was small, ugly and lazy but a key figure in the literary world. A scholar at Eton and at Balliol he was married to a succession of beautiful women. Something about Cyril enraged Waugh and he was the victim of Waugh's spiteful wit throughout his life. I see his resentment of Connolly as very significant:

Connolly had all the talent but none of the true literary success Waugh enjoyed. So why was Waugh so obsessed with him? I think it was because Connolly enjoyed life and all the pleasures – sensual, culinary, erotic, intellectual – that life could offer. Waugh wanted the same but somehow it didn't make him happy. I think Connolly was fundamentally a happy man and Waugh – the embittered misanthrope – could see it and couldn't stand it.

**R – is for reputation.** Who remembers Cyril Connolly today? Let alone Peter Quennell. Yet Waugh's reputation grows and grows and now is receiving the ultimate accolade of an Oxford University Press Collected Works. Every word he wrote will be enshrined and annotated in forty-three of scrupulously edited volumes – and yet Waugh only died 53 years ago – 53 years ago this month, as it happens. It's unparalleled to be thus immortalised – in literary terms – so swiftly. Amongst his novelist contemporaries only Graham Greene, I would say, has maintained a similar standing – yet there are no plans for a Graham Greene Collected Works...

**S – is for Scoop and Sword of Honour.** I've talked about both books and how I believe Scoop to be Waugh's masterwork. As a matter of interest I've adapted both novels for television. Scoop as a TV movie and Sword of Honour as a mini-series. (Both still available on DVD, by the way). I'm very proud of both adaptations. Scoop, because we faithfully managed to reproduce the entire novel – at great expense – with an astonishing stellar cast and Sword of Honour because I actually managed to persuade the producers to cast Daniel Craig as the central character, Guy Crouchback. Guy Crouchback is a typical Waugh protagonist – like Charles Ryder or Tony Last. A bit dull, a bit dim, a bit of a crank – a bit of a bore, to be honest. I thought Sword of Honour would be ruined, as a television drama, if we reproduced Guy Crouchback's character as delineated in the novel because, at the centre of the novel, is a passionate love affair. I told the producers that we needed to be counter-intuitive – we needed a real man, not some diffident, dreary, prematurely middle-aged duffer. I had worked with Daniel Craig before – he was in the only film I've directed, The Trench – and he had become a friend. He took some persuading but in fact he's absolutely brilliant in the films – and it finally makes sense of the novel. The emotions really detonate on screen and the love affair between Guy and his promiscuous wife, Virginia, is real – sexy, passionate, true.

**T – is for Television.** Waugh disliked television – and radio, come to that, and would only appear on both media for large sums of money. The most famous TV interview, in 1959, "Face to Face" is a classic. I urge you to try and see it. The hostility and ill-temper between Waugh (who smokes a cigar throughout) and the suave interviewer, John Freeman, is electric, palpable. Waugh was so rude to journalists that the BBC issued an internal memorandum about him: "Waugh is impervious to suggestions. His sense of his own importance makes production especially difficult. N.B. He demands a very high fee."

**U – is for Underhill.** Underhill is the name of the house Arthur Waugh built for himself in north London and where Evelyn was born and grew up. He quickly came to detest the place as he saw it as a symbol of all his father's values that he, Evelyn, so repudiated. It was situated just north of Hampstead in Golders Green (it still stands, number 145, North End Road). Waugh reluctantly stayed there with his parents in his twenties whenever he was out of funds. But he would walk to Hampstead to post his letters so he could avoid a "Golders Green" post-mark on the envelope. It says a lot about his incipient snobbery and insecurity that he would go so far out of his way to make it seem that he lived in Hampstead rather than Golders Green.

**V – is for Vile Bodies.** Vile Bodies is one of Waugh's great comedies – but a strangely uneven novel, affected as it was by the trauma surrounding the break-up of his first marriage. Waugh found it very difficult to write, such was his troubled mental state. So troubled that, I believe, he plagiarised another novel. Waugh – like Graham Greene and Anthony Powell – was a great admirer of the then fashionable young writer William Gerhardie. Gerhardie had published a novel two years before Vile Bodies called Jazz and Jasper. The similarities are astonishing – the character of Agatha Runcible

comes straight from Jazz and Jasper as does the Fleet Street setting and the character of the newspaper magnate Lord Ottercove in Gerhardie's novel. Waugh lifted the name directly. There are many other parallels. Gerhardie is now forgotten and in his life he fell on hard times. Waugh sent him money and paid him the remarkable tribute of saying: "I have talent, but you have genius". I think I'm the only person to have spotted this plagiarism. One of these days I will list the clear borrowings, chapter and verse.

**W – is for White's Club.** White's Club is a famous Gentleman's Club (men only) in St James's in London. It still flourishes and Waugh was a member. He loved White's and everything it stood for – again a sign of his social insecurity. He loved the "whiff of Whites" as he put it – a combination of charm and aristocratic self-assurance and an effortless patrician sense of privilege – everything he didn't possess but aspired to.

**X – is for X-rated.** Actually Waugh didn't write very much about sex. He had no desire to write explicitly and his novels are very far from being erotically charged. Only on one occasion did he want to use all the four-letter words available to him but was denied because of contemporary censorship. It's in *Brideshead Revisited* when Charles Ryder unexpectedly comes across Julia Flyte on a transatlantic voyage and they make love. Waugh felt he couldn't replicate the sensual importance of that love-making under the prudish restrictions that then operated. And he regretted it. He opted instead for the lamest euphemisms: "I took formal possession of her as a lover... I made free of her narrow loins..."

**Y – is for Yugoslavia.** This was Waugh's last posting in WW2 – to act as a liaison officer with Tito's partisan army in 1944. It was the final nail in the coffin for Waugh as far as World War II was concerned. It was a bitter and frustrating period for him and it provoked a lifelong hatred of Marshall Tito – whom Waugh always claimed was a woman in male disguise. He saw the conflict at this stage of its endgame as "a sweaty tug-of-war between teams of undistinguishable louts." Whatever love he had for the British Army died. In fact he nearly died himself in a plane crash. A Dakota he was travelling in crashed on landing in Croatia. Miraculously, Waugh emerged from the tangled wreckage, uninjured but quite severely burned. Ten people on that flight were killed. It's an interesting thought-experiment to imagine what would have become of Waugh's reputation had he died then, aged 41, and how he would be perceived subsequently. I think the picture would be dramatically different. The post-war, mature Evelyn Waugh permanently shapes our perception of him.

**Z – is for Zeller.** Dom Hubert van Zeller, a catholic priest, was Ronald Knox's confessor. Ronald Knox was the priest who had instructed Waugh when he was being received into the Catholic church. After Knox's death Waugh eagerly agreed to write his biography. Zeller was very helpful. "Ronnie's death has transformed my life," Waugh wrote. "Instead of sitting about bored and idle I am busy all day long." It was perhaps the final surge of enthusiasm in his life. His last two years were miserable. He wrote to his daughter, Meg: "I am low spirited, old and very easily fatigued and I find all human company increasingly distasteful". On Easter Sunday 1966 he went to Mass and before lunch slipped out of the drawing room in the family home. He was discovered dead from a massive stroke in the downstairs lavatory by one of his sons. As Graham Greene observed he died on: "Easter Sunday, symbolising his religion – and he died on the lavatory, symbolising his humour." It is his humour that makes us remember him.

© William Boyd 2019