

Women and Biographers First!

by F.W. Brownlow

"One would suffer a great deal to be happy."

—Marly Wortley Montagu

Evelyn Waugh: The Later Years 1939-1966

by Martin Stannard

New York: W.W. Norton & Company;
512 pp., \$25.95



To be really successful a modern writer must reach and hold a huge audience, and there seems to be essentially two ways of doing it: the journeyman (or tradesmanlike) and the heroic-histrionic. Scott, Trollope, Agatha Christie, and P.G. Wodehouse represent the first way, which demands a lifetime of hard work and patient marketing, and leaves little time for the kind of experience of which exciting biographies are made. Byron, Dickens, and Hemingway represent the second, which requires strong nerves and a knack for self-promotion.

Evelyn Waugh's career places him firmly in the Byronic line, even though he thought of himself as a craftsman and revered P.G. Wodehouse as "the master." Nonetheless, he had almost nothing in common with Wodehouse, a modest, private, intensely shy man. Waugh was a very different type. He shared Byron's gift for dramatics and publicity, and he was similarly brave, pugnacious, and ambitious. Like Byron he hankered for success in action rather than in literature, a desire which took him traveling and soldiering. And as with Byron, he had a violent streak. The role of antagonist came naturally to him.

Although Evelyn Waugh had a sign on his gate reading "No admittance on business," he led much of his life in public, in a character largely of his own devising, on a series of platforms provided by newspapers, magazines, gossip columns, correspondence, and social intrigue. He

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was even prepared to use radio and television, though always on terms of guarded hostility. The resulting performance was a distinguished one. It explains why people became so curious about him, and why his death on Easter Day, 1966, released a flood of anecdote and memoir that continues today.

Readers wanting to know about Evelyn Waugh are not short of material. In 1975 Christopher Sykes, who knew him well, published a biography. There are several books of reminiscence by people who knew him, and he appears frequently in the memoirs of his contemporaries. Selections from his diaries, correspondence, and journalism are available. Now there is a thousand-page academic biography, of which the present book is the second volume.

When Frances Donaldson, who had written a delightful memoir of Evelyn Waugh, came to write a life of P.G. Wodehouse, she had a hard time showing that Wodehouse had any life at all away from his typewriter. Martin Stannard faced the entirely different problem of making a coherent narrative out of an enormous mass of material, most of it emanating from the subject himself, much of it already known, and nearly all

of it bearing upon Waugh's activities as a familiar, pungently characterized public figure. In the circumstances, it is understandable that Stannard should have decided to go looking for the unknown, private Evelyn Waugh.

To do this he drew upon much unpublished material, especially letters, and upon interviews with Waugh's surviving acquaintances. So much is already available, however, that a reader familiar with the subject will probably not learn a great deal about Waugh from Stannard's book, and in fact will often want to turn from the biography to the originals. The most interesting new material, enough of it to be significant, reveals a little of the Waugh known to his family and really close friends, a very funny man, capable of great kindness, constantly and heroically generous. And while he could be extremely difficult, it will occur to some of Stannard's readers that in his later years Waugh often found himself among people who deserved all the difficulty he could inflict.

Of course, the important thing about a book like this is its narrative interpretation of the author's life and work. Stannard's later Waugh is an increasingly withdrawn and embittered man at odds with himself and his times, disliked and dislikeable. Although enormously successful as a writer, he is haunted by feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and failure. Hence, despite the bluster of his public persona, he is deeply divided against himself. At the period of *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* this division drives him mad. Finally, issuing in the form of depression and incapacity, it kills him. His writings are a kind of allegorical or symbolic descant on this story, which some of Stannard's first reviewers described as harrowing and tragic.

It is certainly an interesting story, and a profoundly moral one, a stern warning to any writer who might be tempted to go against the grain of his age. It is also

an extremely unoriginal one. The name of the unfortunate hero may vary, but as a kind of modern version of the rake's progress this tale of a divided self and what became of it has been told about a number of very successful, very famous, very original artists. To name only three: John Wain told it at Lord Byron's expense, Edmund Wilson at Charles Dickens', and Ernest Newman at Franz Liszt's. If lives like these are in some sense failures, and if Evelyn Waugh's life was a harrowing tragedy, what have the rest of us to hope for?

Well. Like More's Utopians, we, and no doubt Martin Stannard, can always hope for good digestions, permanent employment, a well-funded pension, and a comfortable old age. Evelyn Waugh chose to live more adventurously, and Stannard's immense, informative, industriously assembled book is decidedly out of sympathy with its subject and his chosen way of life. By any ordinary, non-utopian standard Waugh was immensely successful, not only as a writer, but in shaping circumstances to his desires. A man of great vitality, he earned every inch of his place in the world, and a fine, capacious place it was, too. He suffered intermittently from melancholy; he despised socialism; and the Church disappointed him—none of which killed him. Evelyn Waugh died of the natural and untragic conditions known as weariness and old age, both of them premature in his case, but both brought on by the punishing life he chose to lead. And neither finished him off, one notices, until he had completed his masterpiece, the trilogy *Sword of Honour*.

Why would a biographer who is prepared to spend so much time on an author be so careful to keep his subject's religion, politics, and social ambition at arm's length? Why be so ready to agree with his subject's critics? After *Pinfold* appeared, J.B. Priestley, an industrious, prosperous, but minor writer of left-wing sympathies, attacked Waugh as Pinfold, saying that Pinfold was haunted by the voices of Waugh's own bad conscience, telling him he was a fake. Stannard calls Priestley's piece a silly article, and quotes from Waugh's masterly reply; but he omits its most telling passages, discounts Waugh's own explanations of his experience, and in fact agrees with Priestley. He discovers Waugh's unconscious in the novel and hears "a barrage of self-hatred" in Pin-

fold's voices—a boring reading of a funny, moving novel.

Perhaps in this egalitarian age Martin Stannard has no wish to make himself obnoxious to colleagues or reviewers. Perhaps he is sincere in his disapproval. Yet so conventional an approach to a writer like Waugh shows a lack of enterprise. By now Waugh's attitudes present no threat to anyone's ambition or self-esteem, and his notorious snobbery is far too easy a target in an age so smugly proud of its social virtue. In Waugh's youth it was natural for a writer of his background and education to gravitate toward the fashionable end of society, as it was for his successors to ape the accents and attitudes of the working class. That is why, in his later years, flaunting his social habits proved an easy way of baiting critics. Besides, although he enjoyed smart company, Evelyn Waugh—as Stannard's evidence shows—had no illusions about his status as a self-made middle-class man of letters, and seems to have been proud of it and of his self-sufficiency.

It is hard to gauge Stannard's opinion of this aspect of Waugh's life. Sometimes he falls into a kind of reflexive snobbery of his own by tending to accept at face value the condescending assessments offered by some of Waugh's upper-class friends. Stannard presents Alfred Duff Cooper, who called Waugh a common little man, as an enviable man of the world. Yet Cooper, on the record as Stannard presents it, was a violent, lecherous, and brutal man, a second-rate politician and a negligible writer who, as a social climber, left Waugh standing. Waugh assessed him pretty accurately. Another example: since acknowledgment to Waugh's family is conspicuously missing from the book, it emerges that for private information and comment, especially about Waugh's children, the author must be drawing upon gossip from someone, probably a woman, who knew the family. The tone of these passages is superior, knowing, and censorious. Many of them make intolerable intrusions upon lives that are now none of Stannard's business, and some of them, to my certain knowledge, present questionable versions of characters and events. Waugh's aristocratic women friends were part of his publicity apparatus, and he of theirs. None of those friendships can have been uncomplicated, none of the judgments given entirely reliable.

Nonetheless, the chief casualty of Stannard's approach is neither the author nor his family, but his work. By treating literature as contingent upon psychology, the psychologizing literary biography always tends to diminish the importance of a writer's work. Reading the work according to his version of the life, Stannard reaches eccentric conclusions: *Work Suspended*, *Helena*, and *Pinfold* are better, more interesting works than *Brideshead* and *Sword of Honour*. And because this kind of biography reads the author's weaknesses in his writing, it leaves both novel and novelist equally disabled as witnesses. Only the biographer emerges unscathed from these proceedings.

Yet the whirligig of time issues in revenges. In 1952 Waugh, in a characteristic fit of high spirits, mounted a campaign against a visit by Tito. Stannard thinks this, like Waugh's description of postwar England as an occupied country, was the act of a crazy man, and in some indignation mounts his own pulpit to say so. Current events, however, have vindicated the novelist. Like other postwar arrangements that Waugh judged unfavorably, Tito's Yugoslavia has passed away, and that is why an open-minded reading of *Scott-King's Modern Europe* or *Sword of Honour* will provide a better understanding of Waugh's position than his biographer's account.

It is so much better either to know as little of writers as we usually know of scientists, or else to know them as we know our friends, with charity, generosity, and forbearance. That way we avoid a host of vulgar fallacies and inferences, including the biographical fallacy that a book is about its author, not about its ostensible subject matter, which in Waugh's case is religion, society, and civilization. For most of us who never met him, Evelyn Waugh is a name that we attach to some of the greatest prose written in English, and to a set of fictions that trace what Shakespeare called the form and pressure of the time with prophetic accuracy. The character we attach to that name is itself a fiction. If we were to try to form an idea of the real man from his books, we would have to say that he was a happy man, gifted and fortunate beyond most of our imaginings. Whether such a life would be judged happy within the terms of utopian debate is doubtful; that it was a happy life in the only real world any of us knows is unquestionable. <C>

Who Needs the Historical Jesus?

by Jacob Neusner

"Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and forever."

—Hebrews 13:8

A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus

by John P. Meier
New York: Doubleday;
484 pp., \$28.00

The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant

by John Dominic Crossan
San Francisco: Harper;
507 pp., \$30.00

I have never heard of a book about "the historical Moses," and while philosophers study the thought of Sophocles and Plato, few bother to tell us what the historical Sophocles really said, as distinct from what Plato says he said. Muslims know the historical Mohammed from the Koran and do not ask professors in their Islamic universities to differentiate what sayings Mohammed really said from among the many more that the Koran says he said. But when people speak of "the historical Jesus," they (using the language of Christianity) imply that the record of Jesus Christ in the Gospels is not a factual, historical account at all, drawing a distinction between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history. While the quest for the historical Jesus forms a brief chapter in the Christian theology of our times, it is important because it defines how the Gospels are read in the secular academy and even in many Christian seminaries. Annual meetings where scholars debate and vote (using black, gray, pink, and red balls to represent what he certainly didn't say, probably didn't say, may have said, and certainly said) are routine; the

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Anna Mycek-Wodceki

Holy Spirit is pretty busy nowadays.

The stories of the miracles have challenged faith, but Christians have historically taken it as a mark of grace that they believe. The same data that have impressed scholars during the past two centuries made no profound impression on believers during the 18 prior ones. When historical study promised to distinguish fact from fiction, myth or legend from authentic event, Protestant theologians, mainly in Germany, undertook to write lives of Jesus that did not simply paraphrase the Gospels but stood in judgment of them. An attitude of systematic skepticism raised questions that prior generations scarcely conceived. These considerations engaged theological professors in many universities in Europe and in some American divinity schools and university religious studies departments in particular, with the result that a skeptical reading of the Gospels replaced a believing one. These two books on "the historical Jesus" take for granted two facts: first, that the Jesus Christ of the Gospels, the incarnate God who taught, performed wonders, died on the cross, rose from the dead, and sits at the right hand of God, is not the

Jesus who actually lived; and, second, that historians know the difference between them. *The Gospels' Jesus* (Meier and Crossan assume) simply cannot pass the test of historical method; the Gospels tell us more than the truth that survives the application of this science. Accordingly, these authors undertake to identify the nuggets of history contained within the Gospel.

So the Christ of the Church's faith gives way to "a Mediterranean Jewish peasant," on the one hand, and "a marginal Jew," on the other. These are only two of the many pictures of Jesus that 200 years of critical historical scholarship have painted. The single fact that this "quest for the historical Jesus" has established beyond doubt is that each generation gets the Jesus it wants; pretty much every scholar comes up with a historical Jesus that suits his taste and judgment. The Gospels' four portraits, intersecting and concentric in many ways, have become legion.

This rigorous, unbelieving historicism actually takes up theological questions. Surely no question bears more profound theological implications for Christians than what the person they believe to be the incarnate God really, actually, truly said and did here on earth. But historical method, which knows nothing of the supernatural and looks upon miracles with unreserved stupefaction, presumes to answer them. The premises of the historical question (did it really happen, did he really say it?) rule out nearly the whole of Christian faith. For they are the routine premises that govern this historical job as they would any other: that any statement we may wish to make about Jesus is just another fact of history, like the fact that George Washington crossed the Delaware on Christmas night, 1776.

But statements (historical or otherwise) about the founders of religions present a truth of a different kind. Such statements not only bear weightier implications, but they appeal to sources distinct from the kind that record what George Washington did on a certain day