

# Evelyn Waugh, Catholic Optimist



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By **MICAH MATTIX**

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Evelyn Waugh: Fictions, Faith and Family, by Michael G. Brennan (Bloomsbury, 192 pp., \$34.95)

**E**velyn Waugh defies easy categorization. He was simultaneously a defender of social hierarchy and an anarchist (“He liked life,” his longtime friend Christopher Hollis once remarked, “to be full of disturbance”); a Catholic convert who had a gift for being a misanthropic ass; and a father whose defining paternal characteristic was, as his son Auberon wryly (and perhaps unfairly) put it, “his lack of interest in his children.” He was also a political conservative and an unapologetic aesthete.

His first two novels — *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *Vile Bodies* (1930) — show how a barbaric “modernism” displaced traditional English values, rendering life an absurd crapshoot in which only the lucky or witty survive. After his conversion in 1930, his work, which had always contained numerous references to the Church and religious belief, explored faith more seriously if somewhat idiosyncratically. “To anyone brought up as a Catholic,” critic Bernard Bergonzi remarked in a 1961 article for the *Guardian*, “Mr. Waugh’s image of Catholicism is, to say the least, peculiar.” Among other things, his Catholic characters often lack piety, and the hope offered in Catholicism in the novels, while real, is muted. In a 1960 episode of BBC TV’s *Face to Face*, host John Freeman said to Waugh: “You don’t seem to find very much which is good in the modern world. . . . Are you trying to scourge us into reform?” To which Waugh responded, with his wide, charming, and rarely used smile: “No, I’m just trying to write books.”

Of course, Freeman was right. Waugh’s work does try to “scourge us into reform,” but the reform required is not one merely of habits and manners. It is nothing less than a complete inner transformation in which we admit, along with Waugh, that “everything in the world that’s good depends on [God].” Faith, Waugh continues, “isn’t a sort of added amenity of the Welfare State that you say, ‘Well, to all this, having made a good income, now I’ll have a little icing on top of religion.’ It’s the essence of the whole thing.”

In this new book, Michael G. Brennan, a professor of Renaissance studies at the University of Leeds, reminds us of the centrality of religious belief to Waugh’s writing, even if Waugh the man often fell short of the piety to which he aspired (as he himself was quick to admit). Catholicism, Brennan argues, provided Waugh’s post-conversion work with its “three key dualities — faith and doubt, hope and despair, and loyalty and betrayal.” Waugh shows us how a life devoted to animalistic self-gratification dehumanizes us, while, at the same time, it offers, in Brennan’s words, “the Augustinian consolation that no form of personal weakness can overwhelm the infinite compassion and mercy of a Divine Father who seeks from his children only the heartfelt words: ‘peccavi’ (‘I have sinned’) and ‘credo in Unum Deum’ (‘I believe in One God’).”

Brennan begins, helpfully, with a concise summary of Waugh’s early life — of his family’s literary heritage, of his father’s preference for his older brother, and of Waugh’s early religiosity: He organized daily communal prayers when he was a boy and frequently compiled devotional poems for his family and local congregations.

In secondary school, however, Waugh would become an agnostic. At first, he would continue his odd “theatrical piety, kneeling at chapel during the Creed while others stood and at night kneeling deep in prayer in the dormitory.” But, as he became more involved in other aspects of school life, he dropped these pious poses and, as a result of his discussions with his sometimes contentious divinity teacher, rejected Christianity in a June 13, 1921, journal entry: “In the last few weeks I have ceased to be a Christian. . . . I have realized that for the last two terms at least I have been an atheist in all except the courage to admit it to myself.” In a letter to his friend Dudley Carew, Brennan reports, Waugh explained that he was open to the idea of God as a force but did not believe in the personal God of Christianity.

Waugh entered Oxford in January 1922. He was relatively studious that first year, but he was a heavy-drinking aesthete during his second and third years, taking part in the Bullingdon Dining Club, drunkenly taunting his history tutor, and most likely becoming involved sexually with two fellow (male) students. Yet, as Brennan points out, Oxford was also the beginning of Waugh’s interest in Catholicism. Francis Urquhart was the first

Catholic dean of Balliol College since the Reformation, and many of Waugh's contemporaries and friends became Catholic, including Alistair Graham (the model for the Catholic Sebastian in *Brideshead Revisited*), with whom Waugh visited various Catholic churches in Ireland on a walking tour in August 1924.

Following a deeply unsatisfying year teaching school, Waugh wrote a couple of short stories and traveled to Greece (to visit Graham) before determining, in January 1927, "to set about being a man of letters." His first book, a biography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was published in 1928 by his father's firm, followed by *Decline and Fall* later that same year. The novel was a modest success, and it was followed by Waugh's commercial breakthrough, *Vile Bodies*.

Waugh converted to Catholicism on September 29, 1930, shortly after the publication of *Vile Bodies*. Two of the immediate causes of his conversion were his divorce from his first wife (also Evelyn, though always referred to as "She-Evelyn") and the beauty and "glory" of the church architecture Waugh encountered on a trip to Spain, Italy, and the Holy Land. But, as Brennan shows, Waugh had been preoccupied with the Church for some years. Waugh ultimately sided with "anarchic vigour" in *Decline and Fall*, for example, but that novel nevertheless shows, Brennan remarks, how English society had reduced God "to the level of a mere fashionable commodity." The depiction of one character's taste in church architecture emphasizes "how the barbarians have irrevocably breached the traditional values of English society."

In his 1930 newspaper article "Converted to Rome: Why It Has Happened to Me," Waugh noted two discoveries that were part and parcel of his conversion. The first was that "Christianity is essential to civilization," the second "that Christianity exists in its most complete and vital form in the Roman Catholic Church." From here on, Brennan writes, Waugh's satirical novels would condemn those "superficially glittering worlds in which the essential values of the Church and family life were ignored," while *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) would reassert "the potency of Divine Grace over the secular splendors" even of a great estate such as Brideshead.

A key insight of Brennan's reading of Waugh's "Catholic" novels is that they express a hope that is subtle but nonetheless firm. Waugh's curmudgeonly, acerbic wit can obscure this aspect of his work, but, as Brennan points out, both *Brideshead* and the *Sword of Honour* trilogy end with the central characters' accepting both the fallen state of the world and the immutability of grace. "They realize," moreover, "that they are no longer alone in a hostile and unforgiving world but, instead, may rely on the protective and nurturing support of their spiritual family." Yet even here the ultimate value of the Gospel is not found in its therapeutic benefits — a conclusion Waugh was keen to avoid — but in its truth. There is, Waugh remarks, "an historical fact behind the Gospel" without which it would possess none of its power.

Brennan's otherwise admirable book does fall somewhat short in fleshing out the importance of family in Waugh's novels. While Brennan states that "the interdependent concepts of family life and dynastic inheritance — with all their joys, vicissitudes, and disappointments — lay deeply embedded within [Waugh's] creative impulses," he devotes far less space to this than to the author's Catholicism and never explains in detail how Waugh understood "dynastic inheritance" to be rooted in that Catholicism or central to Western civilization.

After 1945, Waugh slowly disengaged from public life. He was constantly concerned about money (he was notoriously bad about paying his taxes) and was dismayed at the changes to the Mass following the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). Waugh’s health continued to decline. He asked Dom Hubert Van Zeller to celebrate Mass in Latin at the Waugh estate of Combe Florey. Van Zeller refused but Father Philip Caraman, who had just returned from Norway, said the Latin Mass at the nearby village of Wiveliscombe one Sunday with Waugh in attendance, apparently in excellent humor. Later that morning, Waugh suffered a coronary thrombosis. When he didn’t show up for lunch with Father Caraman, who had been invited back to the house after Mass, the family searched and found him dead in the downstairs lavatory.

In a 1962 interview with *The Paris Review*, Waugh remarked: “I have done all I could. I have done my best.” In his last published piece — a review of Van Zeller’s autobiography — he wrote that death is “a means to a more significant emancipation.” This was neither pessimistic nor morbid, but an expression of his deep-seated belief in the reality of a heavenly kingdom in which goodness, truth, and beauty reigned.

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