

EVELYN WAUGH A HOUSEMASTER'S REPORT

Evelyn Waugh left Lancing 100 years ago this December saying: 'I am sure I have left at the right time: as early as possible and with success.' He was the 2,862nd pupil of the school. Since then about 11,000 more pupils have come and gone but he remains one of the best known and most distinguished: he even has an annual lecture in his honour. On one of these occasions, the Waugh family gave the College Evelyn's original final report from December 1921. It is a fascinating document, prescient and challenging, and greatly to the credit of Lancing. To almost everyone's surprise, Waugh had just won an open scholarship to Hertford College Oxford to read History. At that time it was much easier for public school boys to get Oxbridge places – of the 400 pupils who were at school with Waugh over five years, 128 (32%) did so – but only 14 got academic scholarships: that was the gold standard.

In the report, the Revd Henry Lucas, his History teacher, said 'He can write an essay that is fresh and thoughtful. He can think and has the happy gift of finding the right word to express his thoughts.' His English teacher and form master, J F Roxburgh, of whom more anon, said 'His work has great merit and is sometimes really brilliant'; 'I think he has quite unusual ability and a real gift for writing. Congratulations on the first of many successes . . . we shall hear of him again.' The Head Master erupts into Latin, quoting the 9th book of the Aeneid: 'Behold, that which no god would dare to promise to the most fervent supplicant has been brought about of its own accord by the whirligig of time . . .' I am grateful to another former Head's housemaster for the attribution. Waugh's own housemaster grudgingly conceded 'He deserves success and has performed his necessary duties adequately,' but he echoed critical reservations which run through all the reports. When I directed my first Founder's Day play in the Open Air Theatre fifty years ago next month, that very housemaster was in the audience. He was Frank Woodard, described by the 16 year old Waugh as 'a new parson who people say is related to the misguided old gentleman who founded us.'

That remark comes from the diary which Waugh kept on and off throughout his life from the age of eight. It was not intended for publication but became a very valuable resource for him. He even had the Lancing notebooks bound. A school diary as good as his is a rarity. It covers the period from September 1919 to December 1921 and tells the story of Waugh's rapid personal and intellectual development during his final seven terms, in the context of an exceptional period in Lancing's history.

The diary is sometimes trivial and juvenile but it is always well written and often stylish. The narrative tone is already distinctive: arch, ironic and self-consciously sophisticated. We know that Waugh was shy and acutely sensitive to criticism and we see him assuming that protective shell of barbed acerbic wit and defensive aggression which lasted a lifetime. He is constantly looking for laughs, jokes and 'rags.' 'A day is wasted on one that has not laughed.' The diary recounts his phase of anti-establishment bolshevism (his word) when he attacks everything. Weaker teachers are ragged and petty school rules defied. Unsurprisingly,

immediately after the war, the militarism of the OTC – the Corps – is the prime target. He instigates rebellion but agrees to abandon it. In so far as there is a storyline, it is Waugh's desire for success, fear of failure, respect for his father and calculating ambition in conflict with his anti-establishment, bolshie awkwardness. He comes to see that if he is to succeed and get what he wants, he needs to toe the line and accept responsibility. The diary is the story of him doing a sort of deal with his housemaster and best teachers so he can gain the promotions which will help to get him to Oxford. He gives up his subversion of the Corps; he even helps dig the War Memorial Cloister foundations; plays in house teams with some enthusiasm, becomes a house captain, sacristan, librarian, president of the debating society and editor of the school magazine. He responds well to several star teachers and clever fellow pupils - and he works. The creation of the Dilletante Society which arranged discussions on a wide range of cultural matters shows him and Lancing in a very strong light. The boys are given freedom and responsibility: the masters engage with them like adults.

As a boy Waugh was absorbed in art, calligraphy and book design. He was a clever, highly sensitive artist looking for a means of expression. And in writing the diary he was unconsciously finding a creative outlet. Diaries are symptomatic of complex and obsessive characters who are often compulsive writers. They are immediate and of the moment. They should be read with scepticism even by their own authors. From any single entry you could prove that Waugh was rapturously happy at Lancing or that he hated it. It is only in a retrospective overview that a diary begins to form itself into a narrative. As you read his now, you can see the diarist becoming a novelist: the entries get longer, he attends to style, introduces direct speech and dialogue, vivid character sketches and long set pieces of action, comedy and scenic description. He shows remarkable perception, self-awareness and a desire to recall things exactly as they are 'without the opiate of comfortable retrospection.'

One characteristic of Waugh's writing is his very observant and exact sense of place and this is apparent in the diaries. It is often possible to visualise precisely where things are happening. When I became housemaster of Head's forty years ago, it was still a boarding house and the boys' accommodation was still almost the same as it had been in Waugh's time. The principal difference then was that the Head Master and his family with the matron and servants occupied the four storey house above what is now the Head Master's Office. There were less than fifty boys and they all lived in the large institutional south wing – in two dormitories, each with annexes and bathrooms, and a houseroom. There were some individual studies known as pits in the roof space and a resident house tutor who was, in effect, acting as housemaster. Waugh experienced three in his time: Dick Harris, his favourite, who is still fondly remembered as headmaster of St Ronan's, E B Gordon OL and Frank Woodard, who was indeed the grandson of the Founder.

Head's was a very manageable and convivial institution but had bare floorboards, stone steps, iron bedsteads, plain oak tables and chairs, open fires, gas lighting, communal ablutions and almost no privacy, though there was hot water. Schools were supposed to be

tough, disciplined and conformist environments. Only in retrospect might they seem to have been the happiest days of your life. It is worth remembering that an earlier Head of Lancing had said that the duty of a school is to prepare its pupils for death. Not perhaps a strapline for the Prospectus.

Here are a few vignettes from the diaries to give a centenary flavour

‘Last night, waiting for a bath, I had to endure seven solid minutes of the Head’s conversation. He is a bore, though rather an old dear, I’m beginning to think.’

‘The corps parade this afternoon was awful. Vey long and very cold. The attack was really rather a wonderful sight though. All over the face of the downs little knots of men strolling aimlessly about, benignly lost, firing blanks into the air at intervals.’

Here his house tutor puts him on the spot: ‘Ah Waugh. I wanted to see you – sit you down. You see we have got to make another house-captain next term and of course you are the obvious person. You have immense influence in the house, and it really amounts to this, that if you will not accept the attitude of a Head’s House official, I shall have to ask your people to take you away.’ And that convinced him!

‘As I have been persuaded to go in for this fives competition, I thought it would be well to take some steps to learn how to play. . . It was no good however as I was down to play goal for a very senior house game. It was a fearful shock. I had no idea how big a goal is until I started keeping it. After half time I began to lose count of the goals I let through . . .’

‘He undoubtedly means to make us work; a fad I abhor in masters.’

Of a future Archbishop: ‘One Temple who appears to be rather a leading light, came to preach and talked socialism to some purpose but greatly to the disgust of the great washed.’

‘Saturday was Old Boys day. All sorts of quaint creatures in OL ties turned up to feed on salmon mayonnaise at the school’s expense.’

‘The more I see of Lancing, the more convinced I become that our generation is a very exceptional one.’ He was right. Among his contemporaries were two other writers, two polar explorers, a leading physicist, the athletic Ford brothers, one of whom became Archdeacon of York; the archaeologist Max Mallowan, husband of Agatha Christie, an ambassador, the conservative peer Hugh Molson and John Trevelyan the film censor.

‘Yesterday a longish walk with Carew. He waxed introspective as usual. I had just worked him up into a state of mind to renounce the devil and all his works when he fell into a dyke. It probably did his immortal soul more good than any renunciations.’

‘The school debate on the motion ‘the war having ended, the corps should do likewise’ resulted in an astounding victory for militarism.’

'The Dilettanti supper party was an immense success. We were very uproarious. Bolshie Ferguson fell in a cow pat and girt only with a rug continued to fight with Fife all over the hill. Afterwards we soaked each other with water and played a hysterical game of rounders, to return sweaty, wet and dishevelled but wonderfully happy.' Ipsissima verba!

'I have decided to do my first novel next holidays. I have got a scheme but I never realised what an immense amount of labour it entails.' And later 'I have not time adequately to keep a diary. All my energies are being devoted to my novel.'

'I know I have something in me but I am desperately afraid it may never come to anything.'
'I feel I must write prose or burst.'

And finally: 'This morning I came into breakfast rather late to find two letters from Oxford. A formal announcement that I had won the £100 Hertford Scholarship and a private letter of congratulations from the Vice-Principal. I was not a little cheered by this. The good man of the house says, as I supposed, that I got it on my English style.' And with that he went straight up to Oxford. 'If I'd known I was only going to get a Third, I would not have wasted my time working'. Then, like several of his contemporaries, he taught briefly at a prep school, which provided rich comic material; worked as a journalist, which inspired 'Scoop' and once claimed to have sought employment in a blacking factory in order to avoid the fate of being driven into writing. Six years after leaving school he wrote a best-selling novel. And every single Penguin edition proclaims the name of Lancing as though one should have heard of it.

So what did Evelyn Waugh gain from Lancing? From the perspective of the modern Foundation Office he was a disappointing OL. He popped back once or twice while he still had friends here but from the days of his early fame he had nothing more to do with us – or so it seemed. When he was invited to address the Elizabethans in the 1950s he responded with a rude note on a printed rejection card. He seemed to have put school behind him but, as usual with Evelyn Waugh, the truth was rather different.

Many of the characters and events in Waugh's novels are taken directly from real life, thinly disguised, and he borrowed real names, especially from Lancing and Oxford. He had an almost Dickensian fascination with names but unlike Dickens he stole them rather than inventing them. It is said that there were people who dreaded the publication of his novels in case their names were used for disreputable or criminal characters. In his first novel, *Decline and Fall*, published in 1928 when he was only 25, the hero, Paul Pennyfeather, is said to have come up to Oxford after 'a creditable career at a small public school of ecclesiastical temper on the South Downs' (sounds familiar!) 'where he had edited the magazine and been president of the debating society.' He then adds 'and had, as his report said, exercised a wholesome influence for good in his house.' This sounds like a dig at Frank Woodard who had said the opposite. Paul is sent down from Oxford after inadvertently being caught up in a drunken riot. The head porter of his College says 'I am very sorry to hear about it, Sir. I expect you'll be becoming a schoolmaster, Sir. That's what most of the

gentlemen does sir, what gets sent down for indecent behaviour.’ Paul is not a self-portrait and the school in Wales where he goes to teach is very far removed from Lancing. Thank goodness! Lancing, I hope to show, is an influence of far more subtle nuance.

In *Decline and Fall*, Paul Pennyfeather goes to an educational agent called Church and Gargoyle who find him a job at Llanabba Castle [Status of school: ‘school’] ‘to teach Classics and English to university level with subsidiary Mathematics, German and French. Experience essential; first class games essential.’ ‘Might have been made for you’, says the agent. ‘But I don’t know a word of German, I’ve had no experience and I can’t play cricket.’ ‘It doesn’t do to be too modest. It’s wonderful what one can teach when one tries . . . Besides Llanabba hasn’t a good name in the profession. We class schools, you see, into four grades: Leading School, First-rate school, Good school and School. Frankly, “school” is pretty bad.’ Please remember those classifications. On the subject of Paul being sent down the agent says: ‘I have been in the scholastic profession long enough to know that nobody enters it unless he has some very good reason which he is anxious to conceal.’ And Paul’s Llanabba colleague Captain Grimes (a Lancing name!) says: ‘We schoolmasters must temper discretion with deceit.’ And ‘It looks like being the first end of term I’ve seen for two years,’ said Grimes dreamily, ‘Funny thing, I can always get on all right for about six weeks and then I land in the soup. I don’t believe I was ever meant by Nature to be a schoolmaster. Temperament,’ said Grimes with a far-away look in his eyes, ‘that’s been my trouble, temperament – and sex.’ Grimes says he had also been in the soup during military service: “A major came over from another battalion to try my case. ‘God bless my soul,’ he said, ‘if it isn’t Grimes of Podger’s. What’s all this nonsense about a court martial?’ So I told him. ‘Hm,’ he said. ‘Pretty bad. Still, it’s out of the question to shoot an Old Harrovian. I’ll see what I can do.’” Grimes who is one of Waugh’s indestructible rogues becomes engaged to the daughter of the Headmaster, Dr Fagan, who says of him: ‘Grimes is not the son-in-law I should readily have chosen. I could have forgiven him his wooden leg, his slavish poverty, his moral turpitude, and his abominable features; I could even have forgiven him his incredible vocabulary, if only he had been a gentleman. I hope you do not think me a snob.’

And, as this is a (virtual) school, here are a few more of Waugh’s educational observations: ‘There’s a blessed equity in in the English social system that ensures a public-school man against starvation.’ And ‘Anyone who has been to an English public school will always feel comparatively at home in prison.’ ‘There is a natural connection between the teaching profession and a taste for totalitarian government.’ And ‘Parents are not interested in producing the complete man any more. They want us to qualify their boys for jobs in the modern world. You can hardly blame them, can you?’ ‘Oh, yes, I can and I do. If you approve, headmaster, I will stay as I am as long as any boy wants to read classics. I think it would be very wicked indeed to do anything to fit a boy for the modern world.’ ‘It’s a short-sighted view, Scott-King.’ ‘There, headmaster, with all respect, I differ from you profoundly. I think it is the most long-sighted view it is possible to take.’

That drunken riot in an Oxford college quad in which Paul Pennyfeather is innocently implicated, appears again, almost the same, in the opening pages of Evelyn Waugh's most celebrated novel, *Brideshead Revisited* written sixteen years and a lifetime of experience later. In a brush with what is obviously the Bullingdon Club, Charles Ryder first meets Sebastian Flyte, vomiting scion of a noble Roman Catholic family. In his 1959 preface to a new edition, Waugh says 'the novel's theme – the operation of divine grace on a group of diverse but closely connected characters – was perhaps presumptuously large but I make no apology for it'. He did apologise for its melancholic sentimentality! Coming from an Anglo-Catholic family with a liking for ritual and a school grounded in the Oxford Movement, Waugh himself was received into the Roman Catholic church in 1930, the witness to the ceremony being Tom Driberg MP who had been a fellow sacristan at Lancing. He became very strict in the faith and it informs the psychology and morality of all his later work. When Graham Greene said he might try to write a novel which did not include God, Waugh observed that it would be like P G Wodehouse dropping Jeeves from the Wooster books. This is more than just a joke and by the way he regarded Wodehouse as the absolute master of narrative prose. There are many similarities, but Waugh is Wodehouse laced with vitriol – or plum tart, if you will.

Charles Ryder, who is the narrator of *Brideshead Revisited* reveals a lot about Waugh's response to Lancing. In the end he too is twitched upon the thread of Rome. Like Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*, Ryder is the impartial, detached observer who gets caught up in the action. The reader hears quite a lot about his home background and there are parallels with the author. But what nobody knew until 1982 was that Charles is an OL. And that is crucial to understanding him and Lancing. In September 1945, at the time of the publication of *Brideshead*, Waugh noted in his diary 'yesterday I read my Lancing diaries through with unmixed shame.' In late October he mentions writing 'my school story' but by December he had started to write the novel *Helena* which would become his favourite. The thirty extant pages of Charles Ryder's *Schooldays* were discovered in a publisher's file in 1981 and published in a volume of short stories in 1983, 17 years after the author's death. It is always worth checking publication dates. Penguin sent the photographer Chris Yates to take the cover shot for the new edition with its new material. The image shows the Chapel looming ominously above excessively emerald playing fields. In the foreground a schoolboy in a black jacket and boater is seen from behind looking up at the Chapel. The model was in fact Nick Horlock, my then head of house, and, if you will forgive an irrelevant anecdote, he was actually wearing a clown's red nose because Chris liked to put hidden jokes in his book covers. Evelyn Waugh would have approved.

The story places Charles Ryder specifically in Head's House in 1919 and places Lancing precisely in the social and educational hierarchy. Lancing was expressly founded to be affordable to the upper middle classes and it was still true to its purpose. Waugh's contemporaries were the sons of doctors, lawyers, engineers, military and colonial civil servants and businessmen and more than 20% were the sons of clergy. The Waughs fitted

in. Evelyn's father was a publisher and minor author and there were several parsons among his recent forebears. Clergy children are privileged in having universal social acceptability and an excuse for poverty. It gives them unique access to all classes of society and may explain why so many became novelists. Waugh himself had that adaptable quality. Charles Ryder, like Waugh, is civilised, educated and able to fit in but remain aloof. He mixes in aristocratic circles but retains the detachment that gives the narrator vision and a perspective which cuts across the classes. This he owes to Lancing.

In Julian Jarrold's rather subdued 2008 film of *Brideshead* there's a brief scene where Charles is drinking with some Oxford chums of Sebastian's. 'I don't remember you at Eton', says one. 'I didn't go to Eton.' 'Oh, where did you go – Winchester, Harrow – not *Charterhouse*?! 'You wouldn't have heard of it . . . no families, none important . . . ' And, yet, he is among them. Lancing is not named but the point is well made. Selina Hastings is interesting on precise social stratifications.

He calls the school Spierpoint, rather infelicitously, and there are other disguises but Charles's house is called Head's and the book opens with evening school in the houseroom. This is brilliantly described and here is the Lower Quad: 'It was now dark. The cloisters were lit at intervals by gas-lamps. As one walked, one's shadow lengthened and grew fainter before one until, approaching the next source of light, it disappeared, fell behind, followed one's heels, shortened, deepened, disappeared and started again at one's toes.' Pupils and staff are drawn from life. The unpopular house captain on duty is called Apthorpe. This is a genuine name and a few years later Apthorpe turns up as the comic anti-hero of *Men at Arms*, the first volume of the *Sword of Honour* trilogy, described by one critic as 'the Waugh to end Waugh'. Apthorpe is blown up by his portable thunder box. I once received a letter from Dr Reginald Apthorpe OL, saying with some pride that he was the original. Charles Ryder's *Schooldays* has a lot about house politics. The 'plot' hinges on an unpopular promotion to the Settle and an ineffectual dormitory captain and it ends with a perfunctory beating in the houseroom. It only works as a prequel to *Brideshead Revisited* and he probably abandoned it because it would not mean much to a reader who did not know Lancing and its arcane vocabulary.

For us, however, the essence of Charles Ryder's *Schooldays* is a remarkable tribute to Waugh's Lancing teachers. It starts at the beginning of Charles's third year in the school: he is in the upper fifth. There has been a change of house tutor. The previous one has become a housemaster. He is called Frank Bates and is clearly modelled on Dick Harris (Frank and Harris go together!). The new one, whom he calls Graves, is based on E B Gordon, another great Lancing character who also ended up in a prep school! The psychological narrative is of the house tutor ingratiating himself with Charles, seeing his potential and bringing him out of himself by enlisting his help with his printing press. Charles, like his creator, is an artist, calligraphic scribe and perfectionist who has an almost erotic obsession with fine books and gorgeous bindings. Graves taps into this and Charles responds despite his own prickly defensiveness. It is a fine piece of schoolmastering and based exactly on real life as

witnessed by Evelyn Waugh's diary – even the dates match. The whole thing is written in Waugh's terse, elegant, slightly ironic style and the dialogue catches the acid pretentiousness of clever schoolboys. Charles keeps a diary which he writes secretly in evening school and is directly quoted. It is obvious that Waugh is experimenting with narrative technique, mixing a first-person diary with a third person narrator, *Brideshead Revisited* having been his only first-person novel. The variety of techniques and topics in his works is particularly remarkable but they are all about him in some way.

To fit in with *Brideshead Revisited*, Charles's mother has to have died while serving as a nurse in Bosnia during the Great War. This is his memory of the moment when he heard of her death:

'Then, as he grew sleepier, Charles's thoughts, like a roulette ball when the wheel runs slow, sought their lodging and came at last firmly to rest on that day, never far distant, at the end of his second term; the raw and gusty day of the junior steeplechase when, shivering and half changed, queasy with apprehension of the trial ahead, he had been summoned by Frank, had shuffled into his clothes, run headlong down the turret stairs and with a new and deeper alarm knocked at the door. 'Charles, I have just had a telegram from your father which you must read. I'll leave you alone with it.' . . . 'It seemed to him that it was not in the uplands of Bosnia but here on the turret stairs, in the unlighted boxroom passage, in the windy cloisters that his mother had fallen, killed not by a German shell but by a shrill voice sounding across the changing room: 'Ryder here? Ryder? Frank wants him at the double.'

When young, Charles, like Waugh, had considered going into the Church but, it says, 'his religious phase had passed and lingered now only in a love of Gothic architecture and breviaries.' As he matures, he detects in himself a Jekyll and Hyde split and this sheds some light on Waugh's complex personality because Charles is unquestionably a self-portrait though considerably less bolshie and abrasive than Waugh himself who became a byword for beastliness. He claimed to have 'kept aloof from bullying, uncouth behaviour and most sexual indiscretions' at school but he had a cruel streak. His frivolity was defensive and he could never resist outrageously offensive put-downs. Of one junior whom he teased mercilessly he later wrote: 'He now belongs to the same club as myself in London. We do not bandy reminiscences.' He just couldn't help himself (Jane Austen sometimes had the same trouble). But Waugh also shows self-knowledge. 'Experience has taught me', he wrote, 'that not everyone takes to me at first sight', adding in brackets '(or on closer acquaintance)'. The extraordinary self-portrait in his novel *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, written in 1957, analyses this carapace with grim self-loathing. All through his life you can detect a tension between how Waugh wanted to be and how he actually was. No wonder the chapel looms so large!

Waugh read his Lancing diaries again when writing 'A Little Learning', the first and only volume of his autobiography. For Charles Ryder he had fictionalised them into what he wanted his character and the school to be. Now, aged about sixty he faced up to himself

with coruscating honesty saying: 'If what I wrote was a true account of myself, I was conceited, heartless and cautiously malevolent. I should like to believe that even in this private journal I was dissembling a more generous nature; that I absurdly thought cynicism and malice the marks of maturity. I pray it may be so. But the damning evidence is there in sentence after sentence on page after page of consistent caddishness.' And the caddishness he defines as 'covert self-seeking rather than cruelty to individual boys': the pretence that he was not ambitious when in fact he was. It is a sort of expiation but again it is not the whole truth: the diary reveals great charm and sensitivity. He is an unreliable narrator who always adopts a persona – he did so when writing at 17 and when rereading 40 years later. His school friend the writer Dudley Carew said that Waugh, like his father, was acting all the time and hiding behind a protective façade.

At about the same time as re-reading the diary, Waugh agreed to be interviewed by the penetrating inquisitor John Freeman on the BBC's Face to Face programme. You can find it online. The author comes across as a caricature of preposterous arrogance. But if you watch closely, you can see the shy, clever, naughty schoolboy delighting in scoring enigmatic points. Freeman tries to make him say he was unhappy at Lancing. Waugh wrong-foots him and leaves the alma mater unscathed.

A Little Learning published, in 1964, two years before his death, is a marvellous book. In it Waugh describes his arrival at Lancing in the summer of 1917. This was one of the lowest points in the school's history: three years into the war; austerity; reduced numbers; the best young teachers away on active service; a daily death-toll of OJs; the OTC dominant and, to quote him, 'food that would have provoked a mutiny in a mid-Victorian poor-house.' The book is carefully constructed, separating the first two awful war years at Lancing (for which he kept no diary) from the years 1919-21 when he was in the Sixth Form and an amazing recovery had issued in one of the school's golden eras. It is beautifully written with a characteristic blend of barbed wit, human comedy, self-deprecating assertiveness and vivid description. Again, this irritable, inverted iconoclast could have done a total hatchet job on his old school, but he cannot disguise his nostalgia or the extent of his debt to his teachers and several of his fellow pupils.

Here he gives us his very first impressions of the College: 'Lancing was monastic, indeed, and medieval in the full sense of the English Gothic revival; solitary, all of a piece, spread over a series of terraces sliced out of a spur of the downs. We had been sent some photographs of the buildings, but they failed to prepare us for the dramatic dominance of the chapel which filled the scene before us. Mr Woodard intended all his schools to be a reaffirmation of the Anglican Faith and Lancing chapel was to be the culminating monument of his design, proclaiming his purpose in the clearest tones. I know of no more spectacular post-reformation ecclesiastical building in the kingdom.' I have to admit that last sentence has been used for fundraising!

And here he recounts a surprising return visit in about 1960, which may have been incognito: 'At the time of writing I revisited Lancing after an interval of forty years and wandered about with a few tremors of nostalgia. The place has grown considerably. The startling change since my day was in the environs. The austere isolation, deliberately sought by the Founder has, for good or ill – I dare say for good – been entirely lost. I saw a small boy running on the gravel margin of the Lower Quad and as I came into the Upper Quad I saw something which would have been still less conceivable in my boyhood. A car drove through the tower gateway and halted outside what was the entrance to Olds and Sanderson's Houses, and from it emerged a young mother with two pretty children who proceeded to collect a scooter propped against the wall. The monastery has been dissolved. Suburbia had entered and established itself.'

Thus Biddie Shearwood, Paul and Vanessa are immortalised and Waugh reveals himself. He dwells affectionately on the library and regrets the cynical disillusionment revealed in his 1921 magazine editorial which contrasted his generation with that of Rupert Brooke. He devotes a whole chapter to his two mentors: first Francis Crease, an artist who gave him private lessons at Lychpole Farm in Sompting. He is a subject for another lecture, except to say that Gilbert Pinfold's house is called Lychpole. Lancing is everywhere. Then J F Roxburgh, the Sixth Form Master who was later headmaster of Stowe. Roxburgh was a flamboyant dandy, linguist and literary critic given to spontaneous deconstruction of the words of hymns. He features in the final report and later wrote to Waugh: 'If you use what the Gods have given you, you will do as much as anyone I know to shape the course of your generation,' but, Waugh writes, "before I had any claims to notice in the school, I was asked to tea with him in his minute, almost secret retreat – an enormous honour, rarely accorded. I remember as the clock struck half past five he said: 'How delightful. We have nothing to do until chapel but eat eclairs and talk about poetry.' And I remember with shame that I counted the eclairs." He always felt that he disappointed JFR.

At school and throughout life, gluttony was a feature of Waugh's life. From eating blackberries in the Coombes Road and settle teas supplied by the College chef, to sybaritic feasts at Oxford, he wrote lasciviously about food and drink. Here is an extreme example with a characteristic punchline: 'Let us see what they have been able to scrape up for luncheon,' says a British conman in Africa. 'They had scraped up fresh river fish, and stewed them with wine and aubergines; also a rare local bird which combined the tender flavour of partridge with the solid bulk of turkey; they had roasted and stuffed it with bananas, almonds and red peppers; also a baby gazelle which they had seethed with truffles in its mother's milk and a dish of feathery Arab pastry with a heap of unusual fruits. Mr Baldwin sighed wistfully. 'Well,' he said, 'I suppose it will not hurt us to rough it for once. I had hoped for something a little more enterprising.'

And if that has whetted your appetite for dinner, do not despair. We are nearly there. At the end of the Lancing chapters Waugh says:

‘To sum up my schooling: My knowledge of English literature derived chiefly from home. Most of my hours in the form room for ten years had been spent on Latin and Greek, History and Mathematics. Today I remember no Greek. I have never read Latin for pleasure and should now be hard put to it to compose a simple epitaph. But I do not regret my superficial classical studies. I believe that the conventional defence of them is valid; that only by them can a boy fully understand that a sentence is a logical construction and that words have basic inalienable meanings, departure from which is either conscious metaphor or inexcusable vulgarity. Those who have not been so taught – most Americans and most women – unless they are guided by some rare genius, betray their deprivation. The old-fashioned test of an English sentence – will it translate? – still stands after we have lost the trick of translation. In verse the classical metres had been well drummed into us – drummed is the right word. My education, it seems to me, was the preparation for one trade only; that of an English prose writer. It is a matter of surprise that so few of us availed ourselves of it.’

Again, this is partly a joke and not strictly true. Early twentieth century Lancing produced a number of novelists: Stuart Cloete, William Haggard, Tom Sharpe, Adam Diment . . . and of Waugh’s contemporaries, Dudley Carew was a writer and the Labour peer Tom Driberg wrote a notorious autobiography. Waugh’s closest friend, Sir Roger Fulford (the Liberal Chairman) with whom I was privileged to have a well-lubricated lunch a few days before I came to Lancing, wrote stylish historical biographies. A holiday visit to his parsonage home is a highlight of Waugh’s diary.

So, what does it mean to be a prose stylist? It is a matter of rhythm and precision: choosing the right words and placing them in coherent grammar so that each one counts. A good test is that it should be impossible to cut without spoiling the effect. This he certainly achieves. The aim is to avoid cliché and buzzwords or turn them back on themselves, like Wilde, Max Beerbohm or Ronald Firbank. Ironically Waugh’s image of ‘a thin bat’s squeak of sexuality’ is now itself a cliché. He is supremely quotable. ‘Up to a point, Lord Copper.’ His descriptions are enriched by tasteful selection of images and onomatopoeic words though he felt his books were ‘black with purple passages.’ With scrupulous discipline, Waugh developed his own distinctive voice, notably those little counterpoints of parenthesis, deft punctuation, elegant cadences and the vicious codas.

As an example, here is a final extract from *A Little Learning*: ‘The Revd Henry Bowlby was then Head Master of Lancing. He was a contemporary of my father’s at Oxford. A tall, lean man, distinctly handsome except when the keen winds of the place caught and encrimsoned his narrow nose. He walked with a limp but in youth he had got a blue, in a bad year, for hurdling.’ That is the Waugh style: the sentences increasing in length, the striking choice of words – we might have said ‘aquiline nose’ and felt pleased with ourselves. He avoids the cliché and has the slightly comic alliteration of ‘narrow nose’ and the dactylic rhythm emphasises ‘caught’ and ‘encrimsoned’. Then the blue and that damning phrase ‘in a bad year’ ending with the bathos of ‘hurdling’.

He said that his formal education turned him into a prose writer. I have suggested that he was a born writer and we can see the diarist developing into the novelist by creating something out of everyday school life. And those schooldays remained vivid in his mind for the rest of his life.

On one sheet of foolscap that final report with which we began, brilliantly encapsulates Evelyn Waugh and reveals the quality of Lancing. It makes clear that Waugh put work above all else in his last terms but it also contains these perceptive notes of criticism: 'Perhaps he is too much inclined to be intolerant'; 'he shines more in criticism than in construction' and says the Head 'for all his brilliance he is curiously young and out of touch with reality; but if he will search diligently and humbly, he will find it and himself.' He then quotes the Virgil in saying a difficulty has been solved and Evelyn can now leave with honour because 'he had begun to grate against his surroundings and the friction was bad for him and threw out sparks which made little fires in some of the characters about him that were partly destructive!' This is a remarkably similar metaphor to the one used by Willie Gladstone in admonishing David Hare for similar anti-establishment protest in a similar era forty years later.

The Head concludes: 'I had a long and interesting talk with him the night before he left and should like to keep in touch if he does not consider me too much of a traditionalist and a back-number!' Wonderfully, we have Waugh's own immediate account of that talk in the diary: 'I played musical chairs with my dormitory till late and then went to say goodbye to the Head. He talked lengthily and seriously but with considerable reasonableness. We got onto philosophy and religion and he pressed two pious books on me.' The next paragraph records an encounter on the Lower Quad steps with Esther Neville Smith, young and cultivated wife of the predecessor of my inspiring first head of department, Donald Bancroft. "One of the most charming compliments I received was from Mrs Neville Smith, a woman I had never spoken to before. 'Do let me congratulate you on your scholarship Waugh. I do hope you are allowing yourself to be a little pleased. Everyone else is you know.' Most gracious I thought." She had absolutely nailed him. And by quoting her verbatim, in his awkward way, he acknowledges this and reveals himself as a leading novelist about to emerge from a first-rate school.

Jeremy Tomlinson

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