

Two Valorous Officers and Their Integrity and Eccentric Ways:

Evelyn Waugh and Randolph Churchill

Epigraphs

“When I look back on my first few months in enemy-occupied Yugoslavia [in 1944], my memories seem to resolve themselves into a double biography of Evelyn Waugh and Randolph Churchill, as one might imagine one of [the rivals] Gladstone and Dizzy [*i.e.*, Benjamin Disraeli], and at this distance [in 1973] they have become inseparable in the mind.” (The Earl of Birkenhead, “Fiery Particles,” in *Evelyn Waugh and His World* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), p. 138)

“To write a report [in early 1945, entitled 'Church and State in Liberated Croatia']... **was [Captain] Waugh's own idea**....The conclusion of the report stated that **the Tito regime 'threatens to destroy the Catholic Faith in a region** where there are 5,000,000 Catholics,' but added that Tito, **if** subjected to Allied [hence Papal?] pressure, **'might be induced** to modify his policy far enough to give the Church a chance of life.” (Evelyn Waugh, *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh* (edited by Michael Davie) (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), p. 620—my emphasis added.)

“So ended, in a second defeat, Evelyn's battle [to reveal convincingly Tito's persecution of the Church]....**1945**, the year of final victory over Hitler and the Nazis, **was not Britain's finest hour**. The gross needs of war, notably **the alliance with [Stalin's] Russia, had corroded those British principles** which had grown from necessity and idealism and in defense of which the [British] nation had taken up arms. That persecution [of the Church] and massacre should be **dismissed with irritation** and condemned as bias within the walls of a British ministry [the Foreign Office] would have surprised and pained an earlier generation. **That Evelyn is biased is hardly to be denied. Was it just therefore**, as the Foreign Office of the time concluded, **to ignore Evelyn as a deceptive guide to the situation?**

“Let the last word be with Anthony Rhodes, writing nearly thirty years after these events, in 1973 [in his fine book *The Vatican in the Age of Dictators, 1922-1945*]:

'The whole episode is proof of the strong support given to Marshal Tito by the British Government, disinclined to hear a word against him and his Communist regime, because it was resisting Hitler. Yet events in the Communist “satellite” countries since 1945—the arrests and persecution of priests, still not abated today—would seem

to confirm Captain Waugh's diagnosis of Communist persecution of the Church in the new "satellite" states was broadly correct." (Christopher Sykes, *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975), pp. 280-281)

"On 6 January 1945, the Feast of the Epiphany [in the port of Dubrovnik still], Evelyn made a very interesting note in his diary....Here was the germ of the finest piece of poetic prose Evelyn was to write, in St. Helena's prayer in Bethlehem which occurs in his only historical novel [*i.e.*, *Helena* (1950)]. The Epiphany remained his favorite Church feast." (Christopher Sykes, *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography* (1975), p. 270.)

Having recently read much of Captain Evelyn Waugh's Diaries and Letters and Essays written during World War II, I knew that I could not briefly summarize their content and their manifold importance. But, as a result, I have come even more so now to honor him and his integrity as a risk-taking and valorous combatant officer. He was first in the Royal Marines and then in the British Commandos; and, finally, he served on a largely non-combatant Political-Diplomatic Mission to Tito's Yugoslavia in 1944-1945. Waugh was thus placed under a comparably eccentric Commanding Officer, Major Randolph Churchill, who was both his own admittedly intermittent friend and also Winston Churchill's own son and his only son.

Since Waugh was himself also an eccentric officer, his relationship with Randolph Churchill was often strained and brashly breached, while at the same time also being comic and ironical. Therefore, this essay proposes to depict some of this bristling and tumultuous but finally perduring friendship; also to show Evelyn Waugh's enduring integrity as a Catholic military officer.

Randolph Churchill (b. 1911) — Waugh's junior by eight years — was to die on 6 June 1968 (at 57 years of age), two years after Waugh's own death on Sunday 10 April 1966, Easter Sunday. Therefore, Evelyn Waugh's March 1964 entry in his Diary will perhaps now have for us an added piquancy to it, since it not only conveys Waugh's own sharp and candidly eccentric wit, but also his compassion for his old friend and his own action for the healing of their breach:

March 1964 Randolph Churchill went into the hospital...to have a lung removed. It was announced that the trouble was not 'malignant.' Seeing Ed Stanley in White's [their private club in London], on my way to Rome, I remarked that it was a typical triumph of modern science to find the only part of Randolph that was not malignant and remove it. Ed [the 6th Baron Stanley of Alderly (1907-1971)] repeated this to Randolph whom I met on my return from Rome, again in White's. He looked so pale and feeble and was so breathless that we there and then made up our estrangement of

some twelve years.¹

About the valor of Waugh and R. Churchill, it is fitting to report the reliable words of Major General Robert Laycock, “Waugh's commanding officer and patron during the middle years of World War II.”² Moreover,

After [Laycock's] commanding “Layforce” at the battle of Crete [with Waugh himself present], he [Laycock] led an attempt to kidnap Rommel at his headquarters and returned across the desert on foot. He became Chief of Combined Operations [Commando and S.A.S., *et al.*] in succession to Lord Mountbatten, 1943-1947, and ended the War as a Major General.... [Evelyn Waugh's own novel] *Officers and Gentlemen* [the second part of his *Sword of Honour* trilogy] is dedicated to him “that every man in arms should wish to be.” “Tommy Blackhouse,” in the *Sword of Honour* trilogy, shares many points of resemblance to him.³

Frederick Smith, the 2nd Earl of Birkenhead — familiarly known as “Freddie” Birkenhead — said the following about Evelyn Waugh after they had been together closely on the 1944-1945 Yugoslav Mission as Randolph Churchill's second in command. Major Birkenhead (1907-1965) was indeed able to speak quite graciously and very perceptively:

His [Waugh's] extraordinary love affair with the military was more difficult to fathom [in light of Waugh's eccentric and contrary character], and to me remained **baffling to the end. No less probable conformist to the institution life could have been imagined.** One would have thought that **his fastidious mind** would have been repelled by enforced and continuous association with uncongenial people. **I imagined also that as he never played [athletic] games nor took any form of exercise, he must be physically unfit and would find the life hard and probably indecorous.**

Yet no one could have embraced the new love with a greater ardour than Evelyn, and few can have been more courageous. He deliberately chose branches of the service most likely to be exposed to extreme hazard—the Royal Marines and the Commandos. General [Robert] Laycock, for a time Commander of the latter [the Commandos], told me that Evelyn and Randolph Churchill were two of the bravest officers he had ever known, although he qualified his tribute by adding that it was necessary to place them in special positions—Evelyn as Intelligence Officer—rather than as Troop leaders, as he suspected that otherwise both might be shot by their own men as soon as battle was joined. Even more surprising was **Evelyn's complete acceptance of military life** and his apparent **absorption** in it. **In the early period of the war, when I saw him from time to time, the love affair was at its high noon of tenderness and passion.**⁴

1 Evelyn Waugh, *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh* (edited by Michael Davie) (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), p. 788.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 798.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Evelyn Waugh, *Evelyn Waugh and His World* (edited by David Pryce-Jones) (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), p. 139—my emphasis added. The Earl of Birkenhead's own fine essay—entitled “Fiery Particles”—is to be found in its entirety in this book's Chapter 11, pp. 137-163. His essay should be read closely, and in full, and even to be

Furthermore, Fitzroy Maclean — the versatile Scot who became a Brigadier General during the War and was one of Waugh's senior Commanders — said the following about Randolph Churchill and Evelyn Waugh in his Chapter 10, entitled “Captain Waugh”⁵:

“The trouble, you know,” said Randolph [Churchill] confidentially, “is that so few of your officers are my social and intellectual equals.” “I don't mean you, of course,” he added as an afterthought. It was in March 1944. We were **in the mountains of Bosnia**, snowbound and entirely surrounded by Germans, and it was **not immediately obvious** to me how I could satisfy **Randolph's yearning for more glittering company** or indeed my own feeling, **after three months of Randolph at very close quarters**, that my officers and I could **perhaps also do with a change**. The answer, as it turned out, was provided by the German High Command, who, when the weather got finer, suddenly launched a mass airborne attack against Tito's Headquarters, during which, incidentally, **Randolph, as always in an emergency, behaved himself admirably and with great courage**.⁶

Fitzroy Maclean now informs us how Randolph helped to get Waugh over to Yugoslavia, first to the small Adriatic island of Vis:

By mid-summer he and I found ourselves no longer in Bosnia, but installed in relative security on the off-shore island of Vis.

Randolph was never short of ideas....His latest thought was that it would be fun to have Evelyn Waugh with us. **Shimi Lovat** [*i.e.*, the Scottish Catholic, Brigadier Lord Lovat (1911-1995), who was Robert Laycock's successor, and, in 1944, now the Commander of the 1st Commando Brigade at Normandy], he explained, on temporarily taking charge of Combined Operations, **had at once gotten rid of Evelyn**. This abrupt liquidation, arising from some obscure Roman Catholic vendetta, struck him [Randolph] as grossly unfair. All Evelyn [purportedly] wanted to do was to fight the Germans [and especially the Church-persecuting Communists?]. **Could I provide him with an opportunity to do so?**

We needed officers at the time....**Evelyn, I knew, had fought bravely under unpleasant circumstances in Crete. His early travels testified to enterprise and resilience**. And, finally, looking around me, I saw no harm in **having someone with us possessing his gifts as a writer**.⁷

Fitzroy Maclean (1911-1996) admits that he had some additional thoughts about bringing Waugh into Yugoslavia:

I was also, I admit, influenced by another consideration. Here, at last, was someone well qualified to contain Randolph, someone whom, with minor adjustments, he might even regard as his social and intellectual equal. I badly needed a new mission to

savored more than once.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 133-135.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 134—my emphasis added.

7 *Ibid.*—my emphasis added.

Croatia, where the Germans were giving the Partisans [of Tito] a worse time than usual and could be counted on to keep anyone I sent there fully employed.⁸

After a few more details as to his proposed personnel and operational plans for their later infiltration into Croatia, Brigadier Maclean adds:

Not long afterwards, **as a first step, Captain Waugh reported for duty on Vis**....After the austerity of German-occupied Bosnia, life on Vis was almost luxurious. There was enough to eat and drink and time for what Randolph called jolly jokes. **One of Evelyn's favourite jokes was that Tito was a woman.** She, he kept saying. Her body-guard. Her guerrilla forces. And we all laughed, I with vague forebodings.

A day or two later, before Randolph and his companions [Waugh, Freddie Birkenhead, and Stephan Clissold] left for Croatia, Tito came down from the cave in which he was living on Mount Hum to visit me at my Headquarters by the shore.⁹

Given this deft and well-framed prelude, what may we now expect? For, Maclean also mentioned that Tito's visit to Headquarters was during a heat spell, and one week before “Randolph's party [now “a well-balanced outfit”] left for Croatia”:

It was a hot day and we went for a swim [in the Adriatic]. Tito was wearing nothing but a pair of exiguous and extremely close-fitting swimming pants. “Captain Waugh,” I said, producing Evelyn, “of the Royal Horse Guards.” Tito shook him by the hand, looking at him through clear, steady, light-blue eyes. “Ask Captain Waugh,” he said, “why he thinks I am a woman.” Impressed once again by Tito's universal awareness, I passed on the inquiry. Evelyn looked embarrassed [even blushing!]; Tito smiled; and the introduction was over. They did not, as far as I know, meet again.¹⁰

After that “well-balanced outfit” arrived in Croatia, the Earl of Birkenhead (“Freddie”) gives additional glimpses of Evelyn Waugh's ongoing jokes:

Randolph [replying to one of Waugh's unmistakable provocations]...replied angrily to me [Birkenhead]: “Have you ever noticed that it is **always the people who are most religious who are most mean and cruel?**”....But to my surprise Evelyn replied, **not only without rancour but almost with vivacity:** “But my dear Randolph you have no idea what I would be like if I wasn't.”

There was no doubt that while Evelyn remained polite to Clissold and myself, Randolph was getting increasingly on his [Waugh's] nerves. My relations with Evelyn were happy but **it was not in his nature to allow undisturbed tranquillity**, although his occasional disloyalties to me were trivial **and amusing**. He put it about that I was having a homosexual affair with the bearded Istrian intellectual whom I occasionally visited, and later circulated a rumour that I had got at the morphine in my medicine

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*, p. 135—my emphasis added

10 *Ibid.*, p. 135. All further references to *Evelyn Waugh and His World* (1973)—especially to the Earl of Birkenhead's Chapter 11 (“Fiery Particles”)—will be placed above in parentheses in the main body of this essay.

chest and had become a drug addict.

Far more dangerous in its possible consequences [for us in Croatia] **was his obstinate insistence that Tito was a woman.** He never referred to the Yugoslav leader except as “Auntie,” and claimed that the Marshal had been seen emerging from the sea off the island of Vis in a wet bathing dress and that there was no possible question about “her” sex. So obsessed was he with his fantasy that he came almost to believe it and when, at a moment of particular intransigence on the part of Tito to the allied leaders, I remarked how tiresome the Marshal was being, Evelyn replied: “I think she has come to a rather difficult age for women.” He had already spread the rumour in London and Bari [Higher Headquarters in southern Italy] and now repeated it in Croatia, never bothering to lower his voice, so that we became much concerned that the Yugoslav members of the staff would overhear him and that our work might be seriously imperilled.

With this in mind I said to him: “For God's sake stop this nonsense, Evelyn. Everyone knows that he's a man and a good looking one at that.” But Evelyn, with lips pursed, rather like the abhorred Effie [John Ruskin's notoriously and vilely ungrateful wife], merely replied obstinately: “**Her face is pretty, but her legs are *very* thick.**” (150-151—my bold emphasis added; italics are in the original)

After Randolph had one night heard of Evelyn's own “dislike of Effie” — “I cannot bear her....I cannot stand that little pursed up rosebud of a mouth” — he, in his boredom, “tried to draw Evelyn on to more familiar ground by referring to his father's [Winston Churchill's] *Life of Marlborough*, and asking him if he did not consider it a great work.” (150) And this was Evelyn Waugh's candid answer:

“As history,” Evelyn replied with unattractive vigour, “it is beneath contempt, the special pleading of a defense lawyer. As literature it is worthless. It is written in a sham Augustan prose which could only have been achieved by a man who thought always in terms of public speech, and the antitheses clang like hammers in an arsenal.” (150)

These blunt remarks about one's father and his book would wound any loyal and pious son, especially a temperamental son like Randolph, and despite the eloquent learning behind Waugh's own specific and incisive criticisms. And thus Randolph again became very angry with Waugh and even comparably mocking of Captain Waugh, who was himself still a military subordinate of Major Churchill's.

The Earl of Birkenhead also relates how serenely, even nonchalantly, Captain Waugh, under fire, responded to one dangerous German bombardment of their Croatian village of Topusco, “the village in which the [British] Mission was situated” (144); and Topusco “was also the GHQ [General Headquarters] of the Partisan army in Croatia.” (144) In part, this is how Birkenhead tells the tale:

Shortly before dawn I fell into a troubled sleep from which I was aroused by a heavy

kick in the ribs. **Randolph** [Birkenhead's roommate in the Mission building] **was standing over me, his face transfigured by that mingled excitement and rage that so often possessed him at the approach of danger.** “Get up you fool,” he shouted: “The Germans are over, and they're trying to get me. They've got this house pinpointed—pinpointed, I tell you!”....Randolph was obviously right in his belief that the Germans were trying to kill him, for they dropped a number of bombs **near** the Mission building, but although they blew the windows out, failed to register a direct hit....

The enemy, having failed to flatten the house, turned and make a low run on the position which they next sprayed with machine-gun fire. As we had no anti-aircraft weapons, we could not respond, and were fortunate to avoid casualties. [While the other Staff were already swiftly down in “slit trench at the back of the mission,” that is to say.] In the middle of the attack Evelyn, **somehow overlooked**, emerged from the Mission, clad in a **white** duffle-coat which might have been designed to attract fire, and which gleamed in leprous prominence in the dawn. At this sight, Randolph's face, empurpled with rage, appeared over the trench and in tones verging on hysteria he screamed: “You bloody little swine, take off that coat! TAKE OFF THAT....COAT! It's a military order!” **Evelyn did not seem to regard even this dire threat as binding**, and without removing the coat lowered himself **with leisurely dignity** into the trench among the bullets, pausing only on his way to remark to Randolph: “I'll tell you what I think of **your repulsive manners** when the bombardment is over.” (151-152—my emphasis added)

Some few days later, as it seems, and after Randolph's long-sustained and sullen silence, the oppressive atmosphere in the Mission started to change:

Randolph soon began to yearn for a *détente* with Evelyn, and was restrained only by pride. In time, he decided to throw even this to the winds and drawing Evelyn aside, apologised if his **manners** had been abrupt on the day of the attack, reminding him that as Mission Commander he was responsible for the safety of all its members. Evelyn replied: “**My dear Randolph, it wasn't your manners I was complaining of: it was your cowardice.**”

This devastating rejoinder caused a complete breach between the unquiet pair, and it was difficult **this time** to see **how the severed bond could be spliced**. It was at this moment that Randolph determined on revenge, and he showed both ingenuity and self-indulgence in devising it....

But Evelyn's strange friendship with Randolph **survived even this penance** [*i.e.*, Waugh's doing the “national dance” with leaping, weapon-toting and hand-grenade-girdled Partisan women at the raucous military celebrations of “The League of Anti-Fascist Women”!], and **a gradual reconciliation took place between them**. The intense relief of their **uneasy truce** caused Randolph to talk more than at any time since our arrival [in Topusco, Croatia], and **his appalling garrulity** preyed to such an extent on our nerves that we decided at all cost that he [Randolph] must be silenced. (161—my emphasis added)

After both Major Freddie Birkenhead and the linguist Stephen Clissold were recalled to Higher

Headquarters in Bari, Italy — and were waiting for their uncertain aircraft to take them — Birkenhead thought of his companions who would be left behind together, temporarily:

I also reflected often and fondly on Evelyn. I wondered what sort of atmosphere would prevail in that little hovel in Topusco when he and Randolph were thrown again on their own resources.

I felt sure that they must separate **if yet another murder** in the Balkans was to be averted, but I realised from our own [arduous] journey how difficult it would be for Evelyn to escape. As I thought of him at that moment with his nostalgia for the past, his hatred of the present, and his despair of the future [sic], **I saw him**, in the words of [the poet Matthew] Arnold [in his poignant 1855 poem “**Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse**,” lines 85-86] **as one “wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born.”** (163—my emphasis added)

Waugh's own later War Trilogy — **Sword of Honour** (1965)— will further convey much of this poignant actuality, and also intimately transfigure much of it, too, in the light of Grace and Waugh's own deep Catholic Faith.

Waugh, moreover, was able to make a later (mid-December 1944-early March 1945) transfer to Yugoslavia's Dalmatian Coast, to the port of Dubrovnik on the Adriatic Sea. This brief assignment alone as a Liaison Officer — before “Waugh's [final] expulsion from Yugoslavia” — became very important for his life, for his future novel *Helena* (1950), and for the integrity of his own witness to unpleasant truth, especially the Communists' ongoing and grave persecution of the Church. He even was able to write a Memorandum about this matter, entitled “Church and State in Liberated Croatia,” which was submitted to Brigadier Fitzroy Maclean at the end of March 1945.¹¹

In the further words of Michael Davie, the editor of *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh* (1976):

By [18] December 1944, when Waugh left Bari for Dubrovnik [by ship], the German army was rapidly withdrawing from Yugoslavia, Greece, and Albania. To help the Partisans [of Tito] cut off the retreat of the Germans, the British in late 1944 had assembled “Floydforce”—a unit of brigade strength...—and transferred it to the mainland **with its rear headquarters at Dubrovnik. Waugh, still part of Brigadier [Fitzroy] Maclean's military mission, was posted to Dubrovnik as the mission's representative, his task being to urge on the Partisans against the Germans....** [However,] With Tito incontestably, by this stage, the *de facto* heir of Yugoslavia, **the Partisans in Dubrovnik, as elsewhere, began to treat their British allies in an increasingly peremptory manner.**¹²

Waugh was to see quite clearly the dangerous illusions of the British military-diplomatic policy,

11 Evelyn Waugh, *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh* (edited by Michael Davie) (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), p. 620.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 597-598—my emphasis added.

a policy which was certainly not particularly interested in the increasing plight of the Roman Catholic Church. Waugh's comments in his submitted Memorandum about the persecution of the Church were, regrettably, thus seen as a form of “special pleading.” In Michael Davie's compact and lucid words, once again, we read and recapitulate:

To write a report on the condition of the churches in Yugoslavia was **Waugh's own idea**. It was entitled “Church and State in Liberated Croatia” and submitted to Fitzroy Maclean and the Foreign office at the end of March 1945. The conclusion of the report stated that **the Tito regime “threatens to destroy the Catholic Faith in the region** where there are now some 5,000,000 Catholics,” but added that Tito, **if subjected to Allied pressure**, “might be **induced to modify his policy** far enough to give the Church **a chance of life.**” The report itself, together with Foreign Office comments, is now in the Public Records Office, and a summary of it may be found in Christopher Sykes's *Evelyn Waugh* [1975], pp. 273-6.¹³

CODA

Amidst all of his duties in early 1945 in Dubrovnik, Evelyn often attended Mass with the Franciscan Fathers, and, after Mass on the 6 January 1945 Feast of the Epiphany, Captain Waugh memorably made the following entry in his War Diary:

Saturday 6 January 1945. Communion at the Franciscan church. I had never before realized how specially the Feast of Epiphany is the feast of artists—twelve days late, after St. Joseph and the angels and the shepherds and even the ox and ass, the exotic caravan arrives with its black pages and ostrich plumes, brought there by book learning and speculation; they have had a long journey across the desert, the splendid gifts are travel-worn and not nearly as splendid as they looked when they were being packed up at Babylon; they have made the most disastrous mistakes—they even asked Herod and provoked the Massacre of the Innocents—but they got to Bethlehem in the end and their gifts are accepted, prophetic gifts that find a way into the language of the Church in a number of places. It is a very complete allegory.”¹⁴

May we now all come to read and savor — and to re-read — Evelyn Waugh's own favorite novel, *Helena* (1950), which was the only novel of his that he ever read aloud to his own children. *Helena* will also tell us much more about the deep heart of Captain Waugh. His integrity, his sustained and mirthful humor, and his profound Catholic Faith.

--Finis--

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¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 620—my emphasis added.

¹⁴ Evelyn Waugh, *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh* (edited by Michael Davie) (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), page 606.