



# Memoir of the Year

by Stuart Reid

London

Among the sneering classes in Britain, Auberon Waugh is known as "Son of Evelyn" or "Evelyn Waugh Part II." Such epithets are as ill-informed as they are unjust, and based on nothing more substantial than penis-envy. Auberon Waugh is, as they say, a person in his own right, and better known, through his newspaper columns and television appearances, than his father was in his lifetime. People do not read Waugh *films*, or for that matter spit at the mention of his name, just because the author of his being was also the author of *Brideshead Revisited*. Even so, it is impossible to consider the life and times and outrageously conservative views of Auberon Waugh without at the same time taking into account the F (for Father) word. Inevitably, therefore, when his autobiography was published here in the autumn, the London literary set focused on the fresh portrait it presents of Papa Bear.<sup>1</sup>

Death has done little to mellow Evelyn Waugh. He continues to reproach the vulgar and the illiterate from beyond the grave. To prigs, of course, he will always be a monster, but even those of us who don't admit to being prigs, and who recognize Waugh's soaring genius, have to agree that he was a cruel and unusual person. Hilaire Belloc, on first meeting him, decided that he was a man possessed. Waugh himself once told Nancy Mitford that without supernatural aid, "I would hardly be a human being." In fact, it must have seemed to his victims that he was pitching it a bit high in assuming that he was even hardly human.

Would a human being deprive his own children of bananas? Most people think

not, if we are to judge by the response here to the story of the Great Banana Scandal, as told by Auberon Waugh in his autobiography. Shortly after World War II, it seems, a consignment of bananas reached Britain, and the socialist government of the gentlemanly Clement Attlee decreed that every child in the land should be allowed one banana. Auberon and his two sisters were looking forward in their deprived way to experiencing for the first time what they had been assured was one of the most delicious tastes in the world. When their mother arrived home with three bananas, writes Waugh, "all three were put on my father's plate, and before the anguished eyes of his children, he poured on cream, which was almost unprocurable, and sugar, which was heavily rationed, and ate all three."

It comes as no surprise to learn that after the banana incident Waugh never again paid much attention to anything his father,

an accomplished moral theologian, had to say on the subject of faith and morals, or that, at five, he would gladly have swapped the old bugger for a bosun's whistle. Did he not perhaps find consolation in the arms of his mother? No, none. She preferred her cows to her children. If she wept when he was packed off to boarding school at the age of six, the incident has gone unrecorded. His father certainly did not weep. Waugh *père* could not wait to get his children out of the house, for the simple reason that he did not like them. It was all rather dispiriting.

Still, man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward, and the young Waugh soon discovered what every child of the British upper middle classes must discover: that to survive at school one must learn to behave with the low cunning of the criminal classes. By the time he went



<sup>1</sup>*Will This Do? An Autobiography*, by Auberon Waugh. London: Century. 280 pp., £15.99.

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to Downside, the exclusive Benedictine public school, he was the sworn foe of all authority, and still only 12. He gave a good account of himself in his struggles with the monks. In one term he was beaten fourteen times—a school record.

Waugh has been accused of whining about his childhood, a serious charge, since Waugh's circle (if not Waugh himself) lays great store by the spartan values of the prep school dormitory. Anyone who falls short of the ideal provokes hisses of "crybaby," "sneak," "swot," "whining catamite," and so on, demonstrating once again what horrible damage the boarding school system has done to the intellectual fiber of Britain's ruling class. In this case, though, the charge is false as well as pre-pubescent. The stories Waugh tells are funny, resigned, philosophical, generous. Here he is on his headmaster at Downside, Dom Wilfred Passmore:

He was immensely fat, the front of his black habit invariably covered with food stains. Graham Greene declared that he filed his teeth and had the cruellest face he had ever seen. I do not think he was particularly cruel, although it seems odd, in retrospect, for a highly intelligent man to have spent so much of his time beating boys. . . . Every evening in term-time a list of boys he wished to see appeared on the headmaster's noticeboard. Sometimes it was merely to tell them that their mothers had died or whatever, but mostly it was to beat them. . . . I find it hard to believe that he derived much pleasure from [the beatings]. Even if he did, I cannot find it in my heart to grudge him such little consolations.

Besides, Waugh has no reason for self-pity. He inherited his father's literary gifts, but not his nastiness, or not all of it. (Though he is often cruel and malicious in print, his friends insist that he is kind, tolerant, and generous in private, and he doesn't beat his children up.) His experiences in the nursery and at school provided him with precisely the strength a young man needs if he is to get through this vale of tears with a smile on his face. Waugh's gratitude to his father is palpable. Indeed, as the book progresses it becomes clear that in later life he held "Papa" in great affection; their correspondence is full of happy ironies and good-natured insults. It might be going a bit far to describe their relationship as deeply moving, but at times it comes dangerously close to it. That Waugh could have ended up a gibbering imbecile as a result of his upbringing is neither here nor

there. The fact is he didn't. No doubt, most of us would have cracked in his circumstances. On the other hand, we all know gibbering imbeciles whose parents doted on them.

In 1957, the undoted-upon Waugh was drafted into the army and joined his father's old regiment, the Royal Horse Guards. He did not distinguish himself as a soldier. His military career ended farcically when, in a moment of absentmindedness, he shot himself in the chest with a Browning machine gun (and lost, in consequence, one lung, two ribs, one finger, and his spleen—but, as he always insists whenever there is mocking speculation, *nothing else*). As he lay dying (as it then seemed), he turned to his Corporal of Horse, whose name happened to be Chudleigh, and said: "Kiss me, Chudleigh." The poor man did not get the reference to Nelson's dying words ("Kiss me, Hardy"), and thereafter treated Waugh with some caution.

After Oxford, where he again failed to distinguish himself, Waugh became a journalist, joining the staff of the *Daily Telegraph* as a gossip writer and "culture sub." The culture sub is the chap who edits the late-night theatre and concert notices. (At the *Telegraph* in Waugh's day the culture sub would pick up the telephone and say, "Hullo, Culture.") Those who care for *New York Times* headlines will delight in the headlines Waugh wrote at the time: BALLET TEACHES NOTHING NEW, AFRICAN PLAY MISSES ITS AIM, NO THRILLS BY VISITING SWEDE, DOCUMENTARY FILM SHEDS NO LIGHT.

The headlines he writes today, as editor of the *Literary Review*, are altogether more sophisticated, but not as funny. Waugh also writes for the London *Spectator* and the *Daily Telegraph* (where he has recently taken over the "Way of the World" column from Peter Simple, Fleet Street's legendary reactionary). He is one of Britain's most successful journalists, earning, if we are to believe the *Wall Street Journal*, more than \$170,000 a year. What is remarkable about this achievement is that Waugh does not pander to popular prejudices but goes out of his way to trample them. He dislikes everything that is decent, worthy, and fashionable in modern thinking, especially if the thinking is being done by a friend, or even an acquaintance, of the earth. But he reserves his special spleen, as it were, for that perennial vice of the British middle classes, compassion. To the charge that vituperative writing such as his own causes the children of its victims to weep, he replies: let them weep; they'll get over it. He guards his back against the enemies he has cultivated over the years and

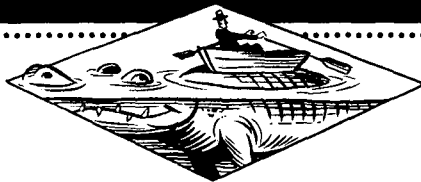
pokes his tongue out at the levelers. The one sentence in his autobiography that sums up his philosophy is this: "The price of privilege is eternal vigilance."

But conservative ideologues should not believe they have a soulmate in Waugh; he has not time for ideology or orthodoxy. It follows that he is no Thatcherite. In 1989 he advised the Iron Lady to resign. Foolishly, she did not listen, with we-all-know-now-what results. Waugh loathes the lager-drinking, bond-dealing, decision-making New Brits who flourished in the eighties, and he loathes too the redneck Tories who at the party conference most years bay for the rope and for tougher prison sentences. He is, indeed, hostile to Law 'n' Order, believing that the police today are little more than well-equipped urban terrorists, with their flak jackets, automatic rifles, and helicopter gunships. Nor is he, like so many Tory traditionalists, an anti-federalist. *Au contraire*, he clearly hopes that a wider and deeper Europe will have a civilizing effect on Britain.

In other words, Waugh does not conform to any right-wing stereotype. There is something of P. J. O'Rourke in him, something perhaps of William F. Buckley, but Hunter S. Thompson is in there, too, and so is Gore Vidal. His concern is first to defend his own turf, then to defend civilization against barbarism. But how to mount such a defense? Auberon Waugh's solution is to set out modest proposals and then to mock the politicians in the hope of thereby goading them into action. Here is an example, taken from a column he wrote in the *Spectator* just before the last Tory party conference. In it he suggests that government can tackle the twin problems of homelessness and unemployment by making the wages of domestic servants tax-deductible. But he is realistic in his approach:

My proposal . . . is not one to wave before the electorate, or even to debate with great gusto before the conference. It is one to be discussed quietly in smoke-filled rooms over the port, brandy, and fizzy peach wine before the lights are turned down, clothes are taken off and the serious business starts.

This settles the question often asked about Waugh: Is he joking or is he serious? The answer, clearly, is that he is always joking, and always serious. I should not be surprised if the next Conservative government makes wages for domestic servants tax-deductible. Funnier things have happened. Ask Mrs. Thatcher. □



# A New Balance of Terror

by Avigdor Haselkorn

The Bush Administration took two steps in October that confirm an important change in U.S. thinking toward the Middle East. Ironically—and dangerously—both were seen as motivated by Washington's desire to put no obstacles in the way of the Madrid peace conference. First, at the beginning of the month, the administration leaked that it had "strongly protested" through "private channels" Israeli reconnaissance flights over western Iraq. The *New York Times*, on October 9, quoted an administration official as saying:

We basically wanted an official explanation from them as to why they did this and we made it clear that we don't expect this to happen again. . . . The fact that we share intelligence with [the Israelis] leaves us puzzled as to why they would have done something like this. We address these security concerns for the Israelis, so why do they need to make these flights?

Defense Minister Moshe Arens remarked on Israeli radio on October 22 that the U.S. had made "strong and courteous" complaints over the Israeli flights and claimed it was "expecting an explanation." One day later, the *Washington Times* reported that the North Korean ship *Mupo* was heading from the Indian Ocean into the Red Sea with a cargo of Scud-C surface-to-surface missiles destined for Syria. The administration, having monitored increased Israeli gunboat ac-

tivity in the Eastern Mediterranean, was concerned that Israel might try to intercept the ship, and intervened. Again, the Israeli consensus was that President Bush was acting merely to assure the convening of the Middle East peace conference scheduled for later that month.

But this was the *second* time the Bush Administration had gone to bat for the Syrian military. Lally Weymouth of the *Washington Post*, known for her access to top-level sources in Israel, reported on September 29 that last spring "America made a previously undisclosed request that Israel not attack" another North Korean ship, loaded with mobile Scud launchers and two dozen missiles. The green light the U.S. gave Syria effectively to absorb Lebanon and to strengthen its defenses in the Bekaa Valley need hardly be mentioned. (In Lebanon, ironically, the U.S. has given Syria what Moscow could never have

promised: annexation *and* immunity from a strong Israeli response backed by Washington.)

But what Israeli leaders have ignored is that recent U.S. complicity in the Syrian military buildup involves more than Secretary of State Jim Baker's "peace diplomacy." While Baker's Madrid follies are treated in the Knesset as little more than his failure as an "honest broker," what is at stake is nothing less than a brand-new strategic concept and a fundamental realignment of U.S. priorities in the Middle East.

The Bush Administration is not generally given to hastiness in foreign policy. In allowing Damascus to arm itself with longer-range, more accurate Scud-Cs, it knows exactly what it is doing. It has begun to base its policy toward the Syrian-Israeli conflict on a balance of terror, abandoning the belief of

the last several administrations that, to deter war, Israel must be militarily superior to its Arab neighbors. Another belief it is abandoning is one arrived at by a Joint Chiefs of Staff study in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War: that Israel cannot be defended within its 1967 borders.

There are two reasons for the administration's shift. First, Bush worries about Israel using its window of opportunity in the wake of the Gulf war to pre-empt the Syrian military buildup. Any such pre-emptive action would jeopardize the Arab coalition that supported Bush in the Gulf war and now, he hopes, will protect the stability of the oil-rich Arab states. Second, by providing for a missile-based "balance of terror" between Syria and Israel,



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