

# WAUGH VS. WAUGH

The family ties that bind

By Evelyn Toynton

Discussed in this essay:

*Fathers and Sons: The Autobiography of a Family*, by Alexander Waugh. Nan A. Talese/Doubleday. 472 pages. \$27.50.



If Arthur Waugh were to address his son today as he did when the boy was at boarding school in the early 1900s, he would probably be summoned by a social worker and directed to seek counseling. "Son of my soul," he called the teenage Alec, in one of the letters he sent him almost daily, "who has walked so many miles, his arm in mine, and poured out to me a heart that the rest of the world will never know, but which I treasure as a

*Evelyn Toynton's last review for Harper's Magazine, "A Delicious Torment," appeared in the June issue.*

golden gift from God." So besotted was Arthur that his friends feared for his sanity, and his employees—he was the managing director of Chapman and Hall, publishers of Dickens, among others—would inquire sarcastically as he entered the office, "And how is Master Alec this morning, sir?"

Having been tyrannized in his youth by his own sadistic father, who was known in family legend as the Brute, Arthur continued to pour out loving-kindness on his "Dear Boy" even when Alec had to leave school in disgrace after a homosexual dal-

liance. Instead of upbraiding him, a heartbroken Arthur invoked the image of a French crucifix in which "the nails that pierce the Son's hands pierce the Father's also. . . . And it is always so with you and me. Every wound that touches you pierces my own soul."

Meanwhile, Alec's younger brother, Evelyn, who was conspicuously excluded from their father's child-worship, seems to have developed, early on, a certain skepticism about Arthur's histrionics, regarding him as something of a fraud. By the age of sixteen, he was writing in his diary, "Father has been ineffably silly the whole holidays"; another diary entry records that Arthur was being "incorrigibly theatrical as usual." Significantly, Evelyn had also come to loathe Dickens, the author his father revered above all others. One of Arthur's great pleasures was to read aloud to his family, with many dramatic flourishes, and Dickens's were most often the books he chose.

A writer as well as a publisher, Arthur produced reams of essays and reviews and paeans to domestic harmony ("Home meant Mother alone; it was she who lit the light, fanned it with tender hands, and kept it glowing in her children's imagination, by day and night") that are almost as choked with sentiment as his letters to Alec. It does not seem entirely coincidental that his neglected second son, when he became a writer himself, ruthlessly satirized the misty-eyed pieties that were Arthur's stock-in-trade, in a style as cool as Arthur's was clammy. It would be reductive to attribute some of the most lucid prose produced in the twentieth century to filial resentment alone, but just as Arthur's saccharine tone willfully negates the realities of life with the Brute (sentimentality, said the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, is a denial of hate), the collected works of Evelyn Waugh add up to a complete repudiation of everything his father stood for.

In fact, what emerges most clearly from *Fathers and Sons*, Evelyn's grandson's lively history of five generations of male Waughs, is the extraordinary degree to which all the complicated feelings that sons can have for their fathers—rivalry, fear, rage; the desire to win their fathers' approval

on the one hand and to rebel against them on the other—were acted out in the pages of the nearly 200 books they wrote among them. It wasn't just a matter of sons dedicating books to fathers, or vice versa, though that was a frequent occurrence; it wasn't even confined to sons taking their fathers as models for their characters. Their relationships with their fathers seem to have been reflected in their very deployment of language.

Alexander's use of the family's private papers—the Waughs were prolific writers of letters and diaries as well as books—not only adds richly to the entertainment value of his account but also serves to illuminate just how tangled are the threads of filial love, hurt, awe, and competitiveness that run through their work. Although he ranges freely over two centuries of family anecdotes, amusing and appalling by turn, the dominant figure here is, as it should be, Evelyn.

Famous in America chiefly for *Brideshead Revisited*—the only one of his books that contains a trace of his father's rhapsodic excesses—Evelyn Waugh is more celebrated in his native England for his savagely funny early novels about the Bright Young Things of the Twenties (of whom he was a prominent member) and his more somber Second World War trilogy. More than one critic has compared him to Swift, and, like Swift, his humor could be very black indeed, grounded as it was in fierce outrage. He called his war trilogy *Sword of Honour*, and in his view of things, it is always honor, never kindness or compassion, that is the supreme virtue. What he hated was moral shoddiness—self-deception, venality, hypocrisy—and all his furious comedic energies were directed toward exposing it. In that sense there was a sort of religious impulse in his writing even before he became a Catholic at the age of twenty-six. (Arthur, who shared the general English distrust of popery, was horrified by his son's conversion.) But if Evelyn was skeptical, from an early age, of Arthur's Victorian meliorism, his bleak view of humanity was undoubtedly made bleaker by the conduct of his first wife, who left him, without warning, for a man Waugh and everyone else in their circle regarded as a lightweight. "I did

not know it was possible to be so miserable and live," he wrote to a friend. This experience informs the novel that is generally acknowledged as his masterpiece, *A Handful of Dust*.

Tony Last, its protagonist, is a kindly, conscientious, slightly dim-witted country squire, deeply rooted in the English past. His wife, Brenda, however, has become infected with the disease of modernity. Bored with their peaceful rural life, she takes up with a vapid young man on the fringes of London's smart set, a fact of which Tony remains unaware long after it is apparent to everyone else. She then demands that Tony sacrifice his beloved family home to provide her with a divorce settlement large enough to bribe her lover into marrying her. A despairing Tony escapes to Brazil, joining an expedition in search of an ancient lost city known among the Amazon Indians as the "Shining" or "Glittering"—a sort of substitute, though Waugh is never crude enough to spell this out, for what was lost to Tony when he discovered the full extent of Brenda's betrayal: "A whole Gothic world had come to grief . . . there was now no armour, glittering in the forest glades, no embroidered feet on the greensward; the cream and dappled unicorns had fled." Once in the jungle, he is catapulted from one disaster to another, finally winding up the captive of a madman who, illiterate himself, makes his prisoner read the novels of Dickens aloud to him . . . over and over and over. In its depiction of an almost medieval figure—a "Gothic" man—cast adrift in a world without God, fleeing the savages of the fashionable world only to fall into the hands of the savages of the Amazon, *A Handful of Dust* is both horrifying and painfully funny, giving rise to laughter of a peculiarly uncomfortable kind.

**E**velyn Waugh inspires a special reverence among writers for the almost uncanny precision of his language. Graham Greene compared his style to "the Mediterranean before the war: so clear you could see right down to the bottom." Gore Vidal, not usually one to gush, called him "our time's finest satirist . . . [writing] in a prose so chaste that at times one longs for a violation of syntax to suggest that

its creator is fallible, or at least part American." Nobody, perhaps, ever wrote more beautifully crafted sentences. It's not a matter of being struck by a gorgeous image here or a profound perception there; it's simply that everything comes sharply alive on the page—there is no deadwood in Waugh—even as the balanced rhythms of the prose take on a kind of muted majesty:

Dawn broke in London, clear and sweet, dove-grey and honey, with promise of good weather; the lamps in the streets paled and disappeared; the empty streets ran with water, and the rising sun caught it as it bubbled around the hydrants; the men in overalls swung the nozzles of their hoses from side to side and the water jetted and cascaded in a sparkle of light.

Waugh was also a brilliant writer of dialogue: you never lose track of who is speaking, a more difficult achievement than one may imagine. Read almost any of his books and it's easy to understand why the critic Paul Fussell called him "one of the heroes, perhaps one of the saints, of verbal culture."

But if Waugh was saintly in his use of language, his ferocious rudeness was such that he was widely regarded as a monster. An arch-reactionary, he made no secret of his loathing for the depredations of the welfare state or his nostalgia for the stable hierarchies of the prewar landed aristocracy, whose way of life he regarded as the last hope and remnant of English civilization: "they provided not only the statesmen and admirals and diplomats but also the cranks, aesthetes and revolutionaries; they formed our speech, they directed our artists and architects . . . they created and preserved our conceptions of justice and honour and forbearance." One of the characters in his novel *Scoop* refers to "the so-called twentieth century," a preposterous phrase that nevertheless seems to sum up Waugh's own contempt for the age he lived in.

From strictly middle-class origins himself, he played out the role of a landed gentleman, to the derision of all the progressives who regularly reviled him in the press. His friends, however, recognized the element of

parody and playacting in this performance—shades of Arthur, with irony added. He had a tailor make him a suit out of the sort of bold checked cloth “real” gentlemen used for country caps and sporting overcoats, with the bright-red stripe of the fabric running along his fly. Although he chose his friends almost entirely from the upper classes, he was no more likely to behave well at their dinner tables than he was when journalists came to interview him. Boredom was his great enemy and greatest fear, and when bored he made no attempt to hide it; when he was drunk, as he often was, he became ruder still. He complained that his trips to London were expensive largely because he had to send so many flowers to the society hostesses whose guests he had insulted.

He remained a practicing Catholic to the end of his life, attributing his very survival to the sanity it provided amid the chaos of the world, though he was deeply distressed by the modernizing of Catholic liturgy and practice that began in the 1950s and, in his view, impoverished his faith. It was the changes taking place in the Catholic Church, as much as anything else, that contributed to his deepening depression as he grew older. (“All fates are ‘worse than death,’” he wrote in his diary, a few years before his own death in 1966, at the age of sixty-two.) On one occasion, his friend Nancy Mitford, after witnessing his spectacular rudeness to a French admirer—he had reduced the young man to tears—asked him how it was possible for him to be so gratuitously cruel when he was supposed to be a believing Christian. “You have no idea how much nastier I would be if I were not a Catholic,” Waugh told her. “Without supernatural aid I would hardly be a human being.”

He was just as prone to tormenting people in print as in person. In book after book, he would name some particularly despicable or disgusting minor character Cruttwell after his Oxford tutor, who had been as enraged by Evelyn’s idleness and insolence as Evelyn had been by Cruttwell’s bullying strictness, and who refused to extend Evelyn’s scholarship after his dismal performance in the degree examinations. Cruttwell is said to have dreaded the

publication of each new Waugh novel; he later went insane, although whether that had anything to do with his recurring appearances in his former student’s fiction is not clear. But not even friends and admirers were safe. Cyril Connolly, who had devoted an entire issue of his magazine *Horizon* to Evelyn’s novella *The Loved One*—a ferociously macabre satire of a California pet cemetery, whose portrayal of godless souls attempting to deny death Connolly compared to Swift and Donne—found himself very recognizably lampooned in *Unconditional Surrender*, the final volume of Evelyn’s war trilogy, as a dandified literary editor surrounded by fawning young women.

One of Alexander’s most interesting contentions is that Arthur, too, was the model for certain ridiculous characters in Evelyn’s fiction who have not previously been identified with his father. There is, of course, the mad Dickens-lover in *A Handful of Dust*, which began life as a short story called “The Man Who Loved Dickens”—a perfect description of Arthur, the president of the Dickens Fellowship and the editor of two complete sets of Dickens’s work. But Alexander also detects traces of Arthur in various of the other grotesques who populate Evelyn’s fiction.

In Evelyn’s first novel, *Decline and Fall*, published when he was just twenty-four, there is a lugubrious character named Prendergast, a former clergyman assailed by religious doubt. (“It wasn’t the ordinary sort of Doubt about Cain’s wife or the Old Testament miracles or the consecration of Archbishop Parker. I’d been taught how to explain all those while I was at college. No, it was something deeper than all that. *I couldn’t understand why God had made the world at all.*”) Alexander points out that Prendergast shares several of Arthur’s characteristics, including greed at the dinner table, a tendency to grow weepy when kindness is shown him, and a habit of calling people “capital fellows”—apparently one of Arthur’s favorite expressions. If Alexander is right about this, it should provide rich fodder for the Freudians: Prendergast meets his end at the hands of a deranged convict who has been given

carpentry tools to help him express his creativity (the “enlightened” prison governor having decided that all evil-doing is the result of thwarted artistic impulses) and saws off “Poor Prendy’s” head when he comes to his cell to instruct him in the Bible.

Alexander also identifies the mild-mannered, sweetly smiling lunatic Mr. Loveday, in the short story “Mr. Loveday’s Little Outing,” with Arthur, noting their shared fetish for young women on bicycles. Since Mr. Loveday is fond of killing people, we are given Arthur as murderer as well as Arthur murdered: a son’s hostility to his father could hardly reveal itself more clearly than that. Occasionally, however, Alexander may be overstating things a little. For example, it seems like stretching a point to identify Arthur so closely with the narrator’s father in *Brideshead Revisited*, who subtly and slyly torments his son in some of the most brilliantly funny scenes in the book. Whereas Alexander calls this figure a “close . . . portrait of Arthur,” Selina Hastings, one of Waugh’s biographers, seems to put the case more sensibly when she says, “Although Evelyn’s dislike of his father may well have given colour to Ryder’s dislike of his, there was little in Arthur’s emotional nature to compare with Mr Ryder’s witty malevolence.” In fact, however egregiously he favored Alec, Arthur was never unkind to Evelyn, from whom he actually put up with a great deal.

The same cannot be said of Evelyn and his own offspring, who might justly have dubbed him, too, the Brute. But whereas Arthur’s father had resorted to physical intimidation—he tried to cure Arthur of his timidity by creeping up behind him and firing a double-barreled gun a few inches from his ear—Evelyn was terrifying simply by virtue of his gloomy distaste for all but one of the six children he fathered during his second marriage. He unashamedly favored his moodiest and most difficult daughter, and his letters to and about her are full of a rare tenderness. As for the others: “I abhor their company,” he wrote to a friend, “because I can only regard children as defective adults. I hate their physical ineptitude, find their jokes flat and monotonous.” According to his

diary, his children's presence filled him "with deep weariness and depression," though he avoided them as much as possible and trained them to stay away from his part of the house. When they were home from their boarding schools for Christmas, he looked forward to their departure, he said, more ardently than he had ever looked forward to the end of term during his own miserable school days.

Like many another father, Evelyn was hardest on his sons. James, his second son, he regarded as deficient in a sense of humor, a sin he considered particularly unforgivable. He therefore forced poor James—who had a painful stutter—to tell a joke each day at luncheon, and then sat stony-faced while James stammered his way through an installment of a joke book the child had bought for the purpose. His severest disapproval, however, was reserved for Auberon, his eldest son and Alexander's father. In his diary, Evelyn described the seven-year-old Auberon (always called "Bron" by the family) as "clumsy and dishevelled, sly, without intellectual, aesthetic or spiritual interest." Years later, Auberon himself wrote, "The most terrifying aspect of Evelyn Waugh as a parent was that he reserved the right not just to deny affection to his children but to advertise an acute and unqualified dislike for them." It was his dislike for Auberon that Evelyn advertised loudest. Even when Bron was gravely injured in a freak accident during his army service in Cyprus and was thought to be dying, Evelyn excused himself from accompanying his wife to their son's bedside on the grounds that they had guests coming for the weekend and it would be rude to put them off.

Yet Auberon, after he came to adulthood, was as forgiving as Evelyn had been harsh. Bron revered his father—though he did say Evelyn was the last person he'd want to meet in Heaven—and when he entered the family line of work, his writing was as much an homage to Evelyn's as Evelyn's was a repudiation of Arthur's. He began by writing comic novels but became famous for his anarchically satirical journalism. Although he

sometimes seemed to be trying too hard to emulate Evelyn (Bron's invective about the "foul-mouthed, dirty and drunk" working classes wasn't always witty enough to sound anything but childishly nasty, and he even continued the persecution of Cruttwell, long dead by the time Auberon himself started writing), in his most successful pieces, such as those for the magazine *Private Eye*, he developed his own idiosyncratic mixture of fantasy, ridicule, and inspired silliness. As a writer, as well as a man, he was more genuinely merry than Evelyn, even when he was on the attack, as he usually was. He was also kinder and saner, devoid of the cruelty that had fueled Evelyn's brilliance and of Evelyn's streak of real madness. (In middle age, after a long period of excessive reliance on bromides to relieve his insomnia, Evelyn experienced a full-blown paranoid psychosis—or a case of demonic possession—that he immortalized in the heavily autobiographical *Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*.) Auberon always insisted on the ephemeral nature of journalism, but much of his own can still be read with pleasure, and although he, too, was accused of being a snob, it is notable that he chose his targets from all points on the political spectrum. When he died in 2001, A. N. Wilson said of him that "rather than aping his father by writing conventional novels, he made a comic novel out of contemporary existence."

Finally, Bron was a much more loving father than Evelyn, as is abundantly clear from Alexander's book. At times, indeed, Alexander's filial loyalty leads him to try for some blistering invective himself, which never manages to be as mordantly funny as Evelyn's would have been. The only really tiresome passages in *Fathers and Sons* are those in which Alexander, who has kept up the family tradition in his own way by publishing books on God and time, turns sneery about various "wretched" and "humourless" and "self-important" critics of his father. Thus, Mollie Panter-Downes, who was actually a rather distinguished writer but who disparaged one of Auberon's novels, is mocked as "Ms. Pants-Down." (Alexander also seems to think—perhaps because

she wrote for *The New Yorker*—that she was American, when in fact she was as English as they come.)

But this is a minor flaw, an excess of filial zeal that seems wholly understandable in light of everything Alexander tells us about his relationship with his father. Although he and Bron apparently "never, in all [their] time together, had a single serious conversation," and despite Auberon's persistent fear that his children would "cock it up," it is obvious that, in his eccentric way, Bron was almost as proud and affectionate a parent as Arthur was to Alec, without ever lapsing into Arthur's maudlin sentimentality.

And whatever happened to Arthur's "Dear Boy"? Alec, too, became a novelist; he, too, enjoyed early success. Arthur, in his autobiography, devoted many pages to extolling Alec's work, which goes largely unread now, hardly mentioning Evelyn's. As a son, Alec remained a model of devotion to the end of his days. His first novel was dedicated to his father in language almost as florid as Arthur's—"In every mood, in every phase of my shifting pilgrimage, I have found you ever the same—loving, sympathetic, wise . . . as in life it has always been to you first that I have brought my troubles, my aims, my hopes, so in the world of ideas it is to you that I would bring this, the first-born of my dreams." Twenty years after Arthur's death, Alec dedicated the first volume of his autobiography to him, "with a love that the years have deepened." He even made the editor of Evelyn's diaries, published posthumously, delete certain entries that were disrespectful of Arthur.

As a father himself, however, Alec was not so much a failure as a complete washout: failure implies some degree of effort, which he never made. Perhaps he was so used to the role of adored son that he couldn't adapt to any other; otherwise, it seems inexplicable that the object of such paternal devotion should have so completely neglected

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## REVIEWS

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ed his own two sons. He spent very little time with them (not that he was any more attentive to his daughter), preferring to devote himself to ceaseless womanizing and almost ceaseless travel; he never even lived in the same house with his children for more than a few weeks at a time. Nor did he support them financially—fortunately, their mother had money of her own—or oversee their education, or do anything else that might be expected of a father. However derogatory Evelyn was about his children, compared with Alec he looks like a model parent.

In fact, Alexander tells us, "When Evelyn was not avoiding his children, feeling irritated by them, dying of boredom in their presence, he made great efforts to entertain them. He taught them games, drew pictures for them, told fantastic stories of his childhood, rollicked with exaggerated laughter at their jokes and took them for walks and on expeditions to local sites of interest. At Christmas he took them to the pantomimes at Bristol and Bath and bought 'trashy and costly' toys for their stockings." Like Arthur, whose endless playacting had annoyed him so much, Evelyn, his beloved daughter Margaret wrote, was "a versatile actor, [who] played the well known role [of father] in a number of wildly different ways. . . . Sometimes he played the entertainer and conjuror. He would devise endless jokes both simple and elaborate, play games and invent fantastic stories. . . . But the role I think he most enjoyed was that of educator and instructor in morals, art and everything under the sun."

Years after his father's death, Evelyn called Arthur's readings of great authors, so irksome to him when he was young, "the basis of a generous education, and of the recognition that education was something to be enjoyed, not the subject for schools." In keeping with that principle, he, too, read aloud to his children, though without, it must be said, Arthur's evident enjoyment. And who was the writer he read more than any other? It was, strangely enough, Dickens. ■