

# "Evelyn Waugh—That's What's Wrong with England"

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## Abstract

*Evelyn Waugh, dead for over thirty years, is a social critic who can still stir violent controversy. His novels and nonfiction books, stylistically brilliant, take no prisoners. He satirizes the working class and the nonwhite races just as savagely as he satirizes everybody else. The Catholicism in his novels, especially in scenes which reveal the Hand of God directing human affairs, runs counter to the overwhelmingly secular nature of contemporary fiction. His works are something of an antidote to political correctness and the romanticization of human nature from which that fashion proceeds. Still, despite giving the most influential critics and scholars ample excuse to reject his work, Waugh has been adjudged one of the premier novelists of the twentieth century.*

Auberon Waugh, journalist, novelist, and ferocious social critic, has identified himself as an antipolitical conservative. This characterization would appear equally appropriate to his more famous father, Evelyn.



From the 'forties until his death in 1966, Evelyn Waugh served as *bete noire* for left wing critics on both sides of the Atlantic, a role he seemed rather to enjoy. David Pryce-Jones believes that "It was not his later novels which were under review but Evelyn Waugh himself . . . a presence to whom the writers of England would succumb if they did not ward him off" (3). These critics found his religious views superstitious, his social views antediluvian, his political views reactionary, and his views on black-white relations racist. In short, he was "caricatured as every sort of ideological villain" (3).

Waugh's early novels were almost universally praised, while critical opinion on the novels of his maturity has been seriously divided. Although much of the adverse criticism since the reception accorded his *Black Mischief* (1932) has been remarkably obtuse, to attribute it solely to a left wing animus would be too glib. Once, at a party, I remarked to a scholar whom I had just met that I was writing on the work of Evelyn Waugh. "Oh," he immediately blurted out, "you mean the fellow who wrote that racist novel?" I assumed he was referring to *Black Mischief*.

A number of influential critics, foremost among them Edmund Wilson, lauded the early novels but condemned the later ones as betraying the promise first shown. There are several possible explanations for this phenomenon. First of all, these critics may be right. Or they may be totally wrong, incredibly having mistaken growth for decay. Or, most likely, the progressively increasing Catholicism, medievalism, and (some argue) romanticism of the later novels seem so at odds with the spare but elegantly witty prose of the early novels, that these critics are quite distressed by the contrast. The stylistic differences between the early and late novels (no matter what arguments as to literary merit they might provoke) do unquestionably exist.

Although Evelyn Waugh's fiction is dismissed by some as lightweight writing ("stupidly dismissed" is David Pryce-Jones's term), three decades after his death his place in English letters seems as secure as any in a volatile age. As the end of the twentieth century approaches, literary reputations rise and fall at a dizzying rate, amid the constant readjustments and revisions taking place within the intellectual community. That Waugh endures is truly remarkable when one considers how greatly at odds he was, and continues to be, with most of his fellow writers, leading literary critics, and influential academics. He certainly put an immense strain upon the objectivity of the socially conscious critic when he stated during the Spanish Civil War that if he were a Spaniard, he would be fighting for General Franco; when he expressed an open admiration for Mussolini; when he made no attempt to disguise his distaste for the working class; when he pictured African soldiers in one of his novels eating their new boots and otherwise behaving in an aboriginal manner, at a time when many felt all humane Britons ought to be donning hair shirts over their colonial behavior; and when he attacked, most abrasively, anything that smacked of socialism or progressivism. Some critics (notably Edmund Wilson, Cyril Connolly, and J. B. Priestley) responded by writing, in effect, that no one with such absurd notions could possibly author good books.

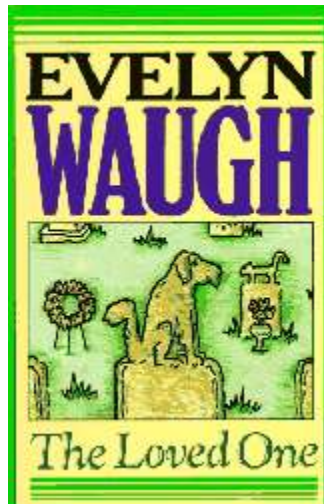
But Waugh has never lacked for advocates. In an Associated Press interview, conducted by Hugh A. Mulligan shortly before Vladimir Nabokov's death, Nabokov stated, during the course of a discussion of many writers, "Waugh's talent should also not be despised." This almost qualifies as fulsome praise when one notes that elsewhere in the interview Nabokov characterizes Malraux as "execrable," D. H. Lawrence as a "pornographer," Pound as "definitely second-rate"; and Camus, Faulkner, Balzac, and E. M. Forster (among other notables) as "formidable mediocrities" (16 Jan. 1977).

One might suspect the objectivity of Alec Waugh's declared opinion that his brother is "incomparably the finest novelist of our period," but not his sincerity, for he also observes that "it is a responsibility as well as a privilege to be the brother of as important a writer as Evelyn Waugh" (217). Such magnanimity is not the most common characteristic of the writing fraternity, and in this instance some degree of sibling jealousy would be especially understandable on the part of the elder brother, a professional writer for over ten years before Evelyn chose that vocation, indeed the editor who first introduced Evelyn to the public.<sup>1</sup>

Edmund Wilson, as has been noted, praised the early novels, even to the point of judging Waugh to be the greatest comic writer in the language since Shaw. However, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), the first of the "Catholic" novels, dismayed Wilson. The pervasive Roman Catholicism of the novel apparently bothered many another critic of secular persuasion. In "The Catholic As Novelist: Graham Greene and Francois Mauriac," A. A. DeVitis notes that Kathleen Knott aims "her barb directly at Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, both converts to Roman Catholicism," as he quotes from her *The Emperor's Clothes*:

It seems to be much easier for Catholic writers who are born Catholic, for instance Mauriac, to stick to psychological truth than it is for converts. This may be because it is much easier to ignore Catholic theory when it is acquired below the age of reason. Anglo-Saxon writers probably have a special disadvantage in this respect. (Evans 112)

The problem with this facile dismissal of the convert-artist's ability to recognize "psychological truth" is that it could as easily be applied to John Henry Newman or, for that matter, St. Augustine (although, admittedly, he was not Anglo-Saxon).



Waugh's well-documented snobbery and tendency toward disagreeable behavior must have certainly taxed the fair-mindedness of his contemporaries. His diaries, which began appearing in expurgated installments in 1973, give ample evidence of the unattractive, even ugly, aspects of his personality. America and Americans were generally dealt with contemptuously in his work. To the American reader, the best known of his books at one time was surely the novella *The Loved One* (1948), a savage satire on those things most false, tawdry, and dehumanizing in Southern California society. Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* had met with great success in the United States so, shortly after the war, a film studio invited the novelist and his wife to visit America. The purpose of the visit was to discuss the adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited* as a motion picture. Nothing came of these talks (it would be many years later, 1981, before *Brideshead Revisited* would come to the screen as a large-scale television production), but Waugh took home plenty of material for his novella.

One member of the British contingent in the Hollywood of the 'forties (which was, of course, satirized in *The Loved One*) has replied to Waugh in a memoir of those days. At the close of a discussion of the three groups of writers who followed the sun to Hollywood, David Niven writes: "There was also a third group, headed by the hornet Evelyn Waugh (who insulted my nice black housekeeper by referring to her as 'your native bearer'), which grabbed the Hollywood gold and departed at high speed to rail against the place and to denigrate its inhabitants" (98).

Another interesting (and hilarious) response to Waugh's caricature of America is James Thurber's "The American Literary Scene," which originally appeared in *The New Yorker* shortly after Waugh's visit to the New World. Thurber, who mentions Evelyn Waugh by name toward the end of the article, assumes the guise of an English writer, describing his experiences during "six interesting, rather, but scarcely restful weeks in America." He writes of the *New York Herald*, "known for some amusing American reason as 'the Trib,'" publishers who "occupy skyscraper penthouses, or 'random houses,'" the "Dreiser brothers," and the Cincinnati "Communists." However, he has begun with the disclaimer:

At this point, I am afflicted by the uneasy suspicion that my American readers, if perchance I have any, will condemn this small commentary for its confessed, its flaunted lack of that kind of wearisome research of which Americans, in their desperate and deplorable love of fact, are so intensely avid. I have not "checked," as they would say, a solitary statement herein contained. (30 July 1949)

Little wonder that the arrogant, peremptory, and generally nasty protagonist of Kingsley Amis's *One Fat Englishman*, a British novelist on an American lecture tour, was immediately labeled a portrait of Evelyn Waugh.<sup>2</sup>

The enmity Waugh aroused in some critics was, to a degree, clearly his own fault. He was a very difficult and provocative man. He might sometimes complain "that his books were ignored or stupidly dismissed," but still he "was content to leave his reputation to the Parsnips and Pimpernels who hold the literary line" (Pryce-Jones 2). He was content to do so even when "the Parsnips and Pimpernels" suggested "that the later books, especially *Brideshead Revisited*, are best passed over in embarrassed silence, except for the scenes of battle in *Sword of Honour* [a World War Two trilogy published in 1965]" (Pryce-Jones 2).

Several writers have now done critical books on Waugh's novels, e.g., Frederick J. Stopp, *Evelyn Waugh: Portrait of an Artist*; James F. Carens, *The Satiric Art of Evelyn Waugh*; Jeffrey Heath, *The Picturesque Prison: Evelyn Waugh and His Writing*; Frederick L. Beaty, *The Ironic World of Evelyn Waugh: A Study of Eight Novels*; and a number of collected essays. Although Christopher Sykes's *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography* makes no claim to being a critical study, it discusses at length, and evaluates, every one of Waugh's books.

The most ambitious effort, however, to denote the characteristic features of Waugh's style and to trace their evolution through the corpus of his fiction is William J. Cook, Jr.'s *Masks, Modes, and Morals: The Art of Evelyn Waugh*. Cook attempts to account for Waugh's change in technique by carefully studying the persona of the narrator and the persona of the protagonist in each novel. These altered personas, he argues, are the key to the difference between the "early" and "late" novels. Cook's effort is, regrettably, more ambitious than successful.



But Cook breaks ground which is well worth cultivation by others. He argues, in effect, that *Decline and Fall* (1929) and *Vile Bodies* (1930) employ the objective point of view, that in *A Handful of Dust* (1934) the narrator-persona and the protagonist-persona become more closely identified, that Waugh's experimentation with first person narrative in *Brideshead Revisited* is therefore extremely important, and finally that identification between the narrator-persona and the protagonist-persona is complete in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957) and the *Sword of Honour* trilogy. However, Cook's explanations of the satiric mode and the various points of view available to a narrator are arcane almost to the point of incomprehensibility.

Despite the murkiness of some key passages, Cook's book is a marker pointing in the right direction. In an interview published in the *Paris Review* in 1963 (quoted by John Jolliffe in "What's in a Name?"), Waugh states, "I regard writing not as investigation of character, but as an exercise in the use of language, and with this I am obsessed. I have no technical psychological interest. It is drama, speech and events that interest me." In the same interview, he makes this observation about *Vile Bodies*: "It was a bad book, I think, not so carefully constructed as the first" (Pryce-Jones 232). So, here is a writer obsessed with technique. Virtually everyone close to Waugh, those with whom he discussed his work, testify to the meticulousness with which he chose both the language and the incidents of his books. For such a writer, the movement of the narrative point of view, over a period of some thirty years, from the objective, through the first person, to the limited third person, tells the reader a very great deal

that he wants to know about Waugh's development as an artist, and about the degree of his engagement with the world he describes in his fiction.

Many writers pass through phases, "periods." Indeed, to identify such segments of the great writer's career is today almost *de rigueur*. Yet, few literary careers have a division so pronounced as Waugh's. Was it the Catholicism, medievalism, and romanticism of the postwar novels, or was it the altered personas, the new techniques and stylistic tendencies that led Edmund Wilson to believe Waugh had strayed over a precipice? However, another perceptive critic believes that the "second stage" of Waugh's career, ushered in by *Brideshead Revisited*, led inevitably to the *Sword of Honour* trilogy, "his most satisfying attempt to expose folly while creating meaningful positive values as well" (Carens 98, 158). Are the novels of Waugh's middle years (he did not live into old age) the blighting of early promise, or are they his crowning achievement? The question may seem to pose rather extreme alternatives. But this is appropriate. Waugh consistently evoked extreme responses, both as an artist and as a man. The following anecdote is, in that respect, microcosmic.

An American scholar recounted to this writer a conversation he had with an Englishman while the professor was abroad doing primary research into Waugh's early career. During what had been a casual and pleasant conversation up to that moment, he mentioned the novelist's name in some regard or other. The Englishman immediately stiffened, then angrily declaimed, "Evelyn Waugh—that's what's wrong with England."

*Basil Seal Rides Again*, Waugh's last work, was published as a book in 1963 after having appeared in *Esquire* the previous year. It is an entertaining but slight work, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The protagonist is the "elderly" Basil Seal, the anti-hero of *Black Mischiefs*. Sykes says of the book, "It is to be classed with *Love Among the Ruins* [1953, another work with a length somewhere between the short story and the novella] to which, however, it is decidedly superior" (437).

In his dedication, Waugh states that *Basil Seal Rides Again* is a "senile attempt to recapture the manner of my youth." Carens remarks that the "thinness" of the story "reveals that he should not, indeed, try to return to that manner" (171). The book is not, as Everard Spruce, one of Waugh's aesthetes, would say, "egregiously bad." It is not embarrassing. It is merely unmemorable. Waugh published no more fiction during the remaining three years of his life.

Considering the disdain (real or feigned) Waugh felt for his American cousins, he would probably have enjoyed the following anecdote.

Shortly after the publication of *Basil Seal Rides Again*, the library at a small college in Arkansas received a copy of the handsome folio volume, numbered and signed by the author. The identity of the person who ordered a copy of this special limited edition is not known for, upon its receipt, the library staff proved to have no knowledge of the author and his work.

Since the text merely represented a short story of moderate length published between covers, the book was tall and slender, featuring large print on pages of heavy paper. The cover bore an illustration which was repeated and much elaborated in a colored frontispiece. The illustration

revealed a corpulent man astride a winged horse above while a young couple floated along in a Venetian gondola below. The cataloguers sifted through this evidence and must have decided that what they had was a children's book by some lady author named Evelyn Waugh. Even the book's subtitle, *The Rake's Regress*, failed to arouse suspicion. Basil Seal was then dispatched to the juvenile section of the library, a most unsuitable place for the old rake to ride again.<sup>3</sup>

Upon closer examination of the illustration, one notes that the young people in the gondola have their heads together, quite like lovers. One also notes that the middle-aged man riding Pegasus has a florid face, a cigar clenched between his teeth, and, in the crook of his arm, a bottle containing a quart or so of some amber-colored liquid.

For fifteen years, *Basil Seal Rides Again* rested on a shelf in the juvenile section. For fifteen years, a possibility existed that the jelly-stained fingers of some urchin might blot the valuable signature of the renowned, and now deceased, British author. However, when a Waugh admirer eventually came across the title in the card catalogue and traced the volume to its source, he found that the book had never been checked out of the library for any child, jelly-stained or otherwise. Whether *that* would have pleased Waugh, the old curmudgeon, is difficult to say.

In *Evelyn Waugh and His World* appears the reproduction of a "specially printed postcard . . . sent to those with untimely requests"; it contains this handwritten sentence: "Mr. Evelyn Waugh deeply regrets that he is unable to do what is so kindly proposed" (Pryce-Jones 212). This icy response was intended primarily for the author's most importunate fans and for those graduate students who, he felt, wanted him to write their theses for them. It could, however, have served as well to answer certain suggestions appearing from time to time in the adverse criticism of his work.

The agnostic Edmund Wilson praised the early satires lavishly but was troubled by the religious content of the novels from *Brideshead Revisited* forward. He suggested that the nonreligious reader could not take seriously the Christian norm by which the "priest-guided" Waugh was judging the world around him. Waugh ignored this suggestion. He even pretended, according to Sykes, to be not quite aware of Wilson's reputation, for that matter, of his exact identity. J. B. Priestley felt that Waugh's infatuation with the aristocracy prevented him from dealing with socially significant material. Priestley even suggests, in his review of *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, a work of thinly disguised autobiography, that Waugh's attitudes are self-destructive. David Pryce-Jones quotes from Priestley's review in his Introduction to *Evelyn Waugh and His World*:

He will break down again, and next time may never find a way back to his study. The central self he is trying to deny, that self which grew up among books and authors and not among partridges and hunters, that self which even now desperately seeks expression in ideas and words, will crack if it is walled up again with a false style of life. (3)

Quite understandably, Waugh interpreted this as a warning not for Pinfold but for him, and as gratuitous besides. He declined, in a sharply worded rejoinder, to do what Priestley had so kindly proposed.

Many readers undoubtedly agree with Wilson's and Priestley's observations, feeling that these writers better express the temper of the times; they are, so to speak, *au courant*. Waugh, on the other hand, makes a virtue of unfashionableness. The writer of the following passage is not likely to resent being called an anachronism:

What a waste of this magical vehicle to take it prying into the future, as had the hero of the book [H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*]! The future, dreariest of prospects! Were I in the saddle I should set the engine Slow Astern. To hover gently back through centuries (not more than thirty of them) would be the most exquisite pleasure of which I can conceive. (Waugh, *ALL* 1)

He delights in the practice of his ancient faith and his impersonation of an eighteenth-century country squire, even as he despairs of the present and the future.

It has been suggested that Waugh's variety alone makes his work difficult to evaluate. In addition to the novels, he wrote several travel books, three biographies, the first volume of an autobiography, many short stories, some devotional pieces, considerable incidental journalism, and an extensive diary (which he probably expected to be published someday). In regard to the variety of his novels, Cook puts it well: "Waugh's fiction itself seems diverse beyond the point of incongruity, verging on paradox and contradiction, often within a single novel" (17). This diversity is perhaps more common among British writers than among American writers. America is certainly alive with experimental fiction, but seldom is the established American novelist willing to depart radically from the style or the genre which has won him recognition. The similarity between Waugh's and Anthony Powell's careers is worth noting. Powell's early book *Afternoon Men* is a stylized comic novel about rootless and irreverent young people, very similar to Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (the addition of Nancy Mitford, with such novels as *Highland Fling*, almost constitutes a "school" of the period), but his later novels become what Waugh calls "genuine social realism." Waugh's slightly older contemporary C. S. Lewis wrote novels of fantasy and science fiction, children's stories, and sermons in addition to his social and literary criticism. Waugh's friend and fellow Catholic Graham Greene wrote both thrillers and serious novels, between which he made a rather formal distinction. As a final example, Kingsley Amis, from the next generation of writers, was not only the author of *Lucky Jim*, a staple of courses in the modern British novel, but also of science fiction and even of one James Bond novel.

Rather than struggling to squeeze each of Waugh's novels into an arbitrary category, the best way to conclude this essay is to point up the common currents which run through them all. Part of Edmund Wilson's bitter disappointment with *Brideshead Revisited* may have resulted from his discovery that its religious preoccupations and romantic view of the aristocracy had existed all along in the distorted mirror images of the early novels, the novels he had praised so highly. From the very first novel, Waugh satirizes the spurious practice of Christianity. Not until *Brideshead Revisited* does Waugh explicitly reveal that Roman Catholicism is the standard by which that false practice is being judged. Beginning with *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*, Waugh satirizes the attempt by modern man to warp or obliterate the traditions by which generations of his forefathers have lived. Not until *Brideshead Revisited* does he make it clear that the vulgar democratic England of Hooper, a worthless young officer from the working class, is being contrasted with an ideal Catholic England—Can England of rigid class distinctions and *noblesse oblige*. This revelation had to disappoint the Socialists, naturally.

Waugh's oblique treatment of moral issues and the contradictions this treatment sometimes appeared to pose especially in the early novels could prove confusing even to those who knew the author well. Terence Greenidge was an Oxford friend and collaborator in the making of *The Scarlet Woman*, a satirical undergraduate film, in 1924. Of "Evelyn as idealist," he writes on 7 November 1966, "Personally, for all that I liked him, I thought him almost insane. . . . Evelyn's Christianity continues to fascinate me. What does it mean? To parade one's faith and draw superbly a godless nightmare of a world" (139).

The satirist's posture is, as Greenidge suggests, challengeable. Edmund Wilson argued that from the point of view of the nonbeliever the elaborate euphemism which is the cemetery Whispering Glades in *The Loved One* is no more absurd than the belief that lighting candles in a church can aid the soul of the departed. A skeptic might also ask why, in *Brideshead Revisited*, he should be more concerned for Sebastian's soul than for poor Hooper's. Because of Waugh's insistence upon the reality of the supernatural, because he is perceived as holding a romanticized view of the Merrie England of yore, and because of his reactionary political stance ("troglodytic" is an adjective currently fashionable), it is difficult for some critics to take him seriously as a thinker.

Even the reader most sympathetically disposed toward Waugh cannot deny the occasional snobbery of his protagonists. The smugness of Basil Seal, Charles Ryder, and Guy Crouchback because they know so much more than the other fellow about wine is not appealing; nor is the implied superiority of the English to the Welsh, Scots (despite Waugh's Scottish ancestry), Canadians, Americans, Africans—in fact, to all the non-English of the world. Sykes suggests that Waugh was not nearly so guilty of foolishly looking up to the upper classes as he was of foolishly looking down upon the lower classes. His antipathy for the proletariat frequently exceeded the bounds of Christian charity.

Nevertheless, each novelist must be judged by the fictional world he creates, for the world of one novelist is not the world of another—or, probably, that of the reader. Waugh's fictional world is a disordered one. In the early novels, he amusingly documents the predatory nature of this world. He suggests no remedies. In these novels, the omniscient, detached, sometimes flippant narrator suits Waugh's purposes well. When the world he is describing becomes too ghastly, he simply withdraws.

In middle life, Waugh determined to write another kind of novel—one in which his protagonist's response to the fictional world roughly approximates his response to his own. Not coincidentally, he chooses a first person narrator for this new kind of novel. The narrator is an artist, sensitive and opinionated. He may not withdraw; he must come to terms with his life.

In the later novels, Waugh suggests ("proposes" is too strong a term) an allegiance to a two-thousand-year-old religion and the society underpinned for centuries by it as the appropriate response to a world of flux and fad. The contemporary world, like the decadent Roman Empire, stresses material considerations. If man lacks the proper relationship with God, he will misconstrue his very nature; then, only an irrational world is possible. Waugh expresses this attitude, in this writer's judgment, too stridently in *Helena* (1950) for the good of his fiction but subtly, unobtrusively, and organically in *Brideshead Revisited* and *Sword of Honour*.



Carens believes that Waugh's hostility to the Russian alliance during World War Two was unrealistic, completely ignoring the British lack of options. Sykes observes that Waugh's political views were so unsystematic as to be almost naive. Perhaps, as some have suggested, Waugh was inspired primarily by what angered or annoyed him. The question is not whether the Roman Catholic Church is really the guardian of truth, or whether Waugh's conservative political beliefs are correct. The question is rather, do these premises work *for the characters* in the fictional dilemmas which their creator has contrived for them? This writer's answer is *yes*.

Even some who did not accept Waugh's premises were impressed with his prescience. In a letter of 24 June 1963, Terence Greenidge observes, "It is amazing how Evelyn in the 'twenties foresaw in detail life in England in the 'sixties. . . . Religion is dead. . . . Britain seems to be drifting, and we await World War III at the most convenient moment for the Government" (69).

To those who share his view of man's nature, who share his passions and his fears, Evelyn Waugh has become much more than an entertainer "notable for elegance and variety of contrivance." One such person was Malcolm Muggeridge who, despite sharing Waugh's Christian outlook and many of his convictions, had an acrimonious personal relationship with him. Muggeridge writes poignantly in the second volume of his autobiography:

Now that Waugh is dead, I greatly regret that I made no serious attempt to overcome our mutual antagonism. Probably I should have failed, but I wish I had tried. . . . When I heard . . . that he had died, I felt quite stricken; not just because he was so talented a writer and satirist, but because there would now never be another opportunity in this world to gather strength and courage from him for the lost battles that lie ahead. (223-24)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>As editor of an anthology of "Georgian Stories" for Chapman & Hall in 1926, Alec Waugh included his brother's long story *The Balance*. This was the first commercially published contribution under the signature Evelyn Waugh. See *The Early Years of Alec Waugh*, 216-17.

<sup>2</sup>See Kingsley Amis, *One Fat Englishman* (New York: Harcourt, 1963).

<sup>3</sup>See Patrick Adcock, "Basil Seal in America," *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter* 10.ii (Autumn 1976): 5-6.

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## Biography

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