

## Evelyn Waugh: Evaluation in His Time Part I, *Decline and Fall*

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### **Abstract**

Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* is presented as evaluated by contemporary critics. This first of a three-part study analyzes such criticism and finds Waugh's humor and style reveal a worthy novelist for his time.

### **INTRODUCTION**

When criticizing Evelyn Waugh's fiction, the immediate reviewer often missed the author's point, but rarely failed to recognize his polish. Waugh's mastery of technique demanded of the serious reviewer some depth of literary analysis, and reviews treating his books as commodities were infrequent. A study of the reviews of three Waugh novels, a study spanning twenty years of criticism, will contribute to an analysis of 1928-1948 as a literary period. Through such novels as *Decline and Fall* (1928), *A Handful of Dust* (1934), and *The Loved One* (1948), Evelyn Waugh's extraordinary gifts invited the ever-growing evaluation of contemporary critics. That Waugh outdistanced his reviewers is understandable. That those reviewers sometimes recognized his great contribution to modern fiction justifies the perceptive

reviewer's function. The immediate critic can herald the worthy contemporary author and a new literary age.

### **DECLINE AND FALL, 1928**

Evelyn Waugh's first novel, *Decline and Fall*, exposed the crumbling value structures of his contemporary England. The work was duly summarized in factual and inadequate fashion:

Paul Pennyfeather, a theological student at Oxford, is expelled as the result of a prank. His subsequent rococco adventures in a boy's school, in the smart set where he is the victim of a sophisticated seduction, and in prison, end with his return to the theological seminary.<sup>1)</sup>

A comparable general summary greeted readers of *The New York Times Book Review*, although it did indicate something of

Waugh's distinctive handling which escapes easy synopsis:

The exaggerated realism and mock sophistication of the style are excellently adapted to the story of the vicissitudes of Paul Pennyfeather, a poor but sincere theological student who was 'sent down' for no fault of his own. His consequent and highly unfortunate adventures bring him into contact with the school system, high and low society, the smart set, the new art movement and the penal system, and return him a sadder and wiser young man to the halls of his college.<sup>2)</sup>

This review stands mid-way among contemporary appraisals of Waugh's initial novel, noting in *Decline and Fall* that "much of its humor is insular in its appeal," and that "there is not a great deal in the book that is startlingly original." But there is much on the plus-side as well, as the fact that Waugh's novel "is a satirical cross-section of very English society," that "there are large sections that make very amusing universal reading," and that Waugh presents his characters so amusingly as to give readers "a certain joy of recognition" in encountering them.<sup>3)</sup>

Representing the less enthusiastic but not entirely negative critic, the straight-laced *Boston Transcript* reviewer calls *Decline and Fall* "a burlesque, extravaganza, amusing at times and at times very dull indeed." Missing Waugh's point grandly, the critic concludes: "One's impression after finishing the reading of it is an absolute satisfaction that the world is far better than Mr. Waugh would have us believe."<sup>4)</sup> A fellow faint-praiser, Mary Ross of *Books* condescendingly says:

Mr. Waugh has a juvenile gusto which is spirited at its best — and at its worst descends to errors of taste as transparent

and silly as most practical jokes. Perhaps you will want, as I did, to give this smart young author a good shaking from time to time, but at least you will have to admit that the boy is having a good time.<sup>5)</sup>

The more generous T.S. Matthews introduces the Waugh novel in the *New Republic* as one of four new books with a quality in common: "Every one of these stories bristles with attractive and immoral people, and he will be a very stout fellow indeed who is not moved by at least one of them to think more kindly of sin."<sup>6)</sup> The reader of this review soon realizes that Matthews writes with tongue-in cheek, for he praises *Decline and Fall*:

It is that all-too rare phenomenon, a good nonsense novel. Its author has had the happy inspiration to take nothing seriously and least of all himself. The result is a book which makes more sense than most.<sup>7)</sup>

Concentrating on Waugh's humor, the critic concludes: "Mr. Waugh makes us snicker oftener than he makes us laugh but it is not his fault that he was born an Englishman."<sup>8)</sup> Other reviewers join Matthews in praising Waugh's "pure fooling from beginning to end,"<sup>9)</sup> his "rare gift of spontaneous humor"<sup>10)</sup> which is "that subtle metallic kind.... a delicious cynicism...."<sup>11)</sup>

Rebecca West has the highest praise for the new author: "This young man is, I say, destined to be the dazzling figure of his age as Max Beerbohm was of his."<sup>12)</sup> Further in her review, one which is still contemporary but written with a year's perspective, Rebecca West says of the character Grimes:

The merits of the first (*Decline and Fall*) were overshadowed by Mr.

Waugh's supreme and startling feat of doing what hardly any modern author has ever done in his first book: creating a character that simply and naturally takes its place among the great characters of fiction that are larger than life-size, and more significant than a single child of life can be. . . . the generation that has spent its youth overshadowed by Dr. Arnold and Rudyard Kipling joyously recognized an embodiment of all the exceedingly queer forms that Nature, driven out with a fork from the public school, assumes to affect a re-entrance.<sup>13)</sup>

Rebecca West's placement of Evelyn Waugh in his time, an age characterized by the decline and fall of institutions which Waugh so audaciously and mercilessly caught in this first novel, reveals a critic of stature.

#### SYNOPSIS

While it is unfortunate one early reviewer

entirely missed Waugh's point (a fault to be repeated by other Waugh reviewers) and another of fixed taste reduced the author to juvenile joking, the majority of contemporary critics found *Decline and Fall* possessing such positive qualities as smoothness of style with story, universality within the local scene, attractiveness of characterization and originality of treatment, and — most of all — a humor proving amusing, cynical, spontaneous, subtle. As an extremely witty comment on the frivolous, the Waughian nonsense began to make very good sense indeed.

After the incongruities of *Decline and Fall*, Evelyn Waugh challenged critics with his *Vile Bodies* and *Black Mischief*, as well as his travel books. Then, a fourth novel appeared, *A Handful of Dust*. Contemporary reviews of this world of adultery and emptiness and his much-later Hollywood story of death, *The Loved One*, will be analyzed in future study.

#### Notes

- 1) (1930) *Book Review Digest*, 1929. Wilson, New York.
- 2) (1929) English Society Satirized. *The New York Times Book Review*, April 7, 6.
- 3) *Ibid.*
- 4) (1929) *Boston Transcript*, May 4, 4.
- 5) Ross M (1929) *Books*. New York Herald Tribune, March 31, 3.
- 6) Matthews TS (1929) The Cocktail Hour. *New Republic*, LVIII, April 17, 258.
- 7) *Ibid.*, 259.
- 8) *Ibid.*
- 9) (1928) *The Times Literary Supplement*, September 27, 685.
- 10) (1929) *New York World*, May 5, 11m.
- 11) Connolly C (1928) *New Statesman*, XXXII, November 3, 126.
- 12) West R (1930) A Letter from Abroad. *Bookman*, LXXI, March, 83.
- 13) *Ibid.*

イーヴリン・ウォーに対する当時の評価  
*Decline and Fall* について (1)

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要 約

本研究は三つのシリーズから成る。本論(第一部)においては、Evelyn Waugh の *Decline and Fall* が、当時の批評家によって、いかなる評価を受けてきたかを論ずる。さらに、これらの批評を分析し、そのユーモアとスタイルによって、Waugh が当時の一流の小説家であったことを論証する。