



## Englishness in Officers and Gentlemen by Evelyn Waugh

Rosalind Smith

The question of Englishness pervades the literary career of Evelyn Waugh as a primary concern underlined by his celebrated farcical, satirical tone. To Waugh's generation, nothing defined their nation more than the archetypal English gentleman, and the trappings of a privileged, upper class existence. A sense of Englishness and the upper classes went hand in hand; the country house, genteel sports such as cricket and tennis, and the idea of 'society' were all images that were simultaneously representative of these two concepts in the public consciousness, creating a tangible image of the freedom being defended by the soldiers on the front lines in the World Wars. However, perspectives of the upper classes and Englishness were irreparably damaged by the Second World War, as their casual, elite lifestyle of privilege and excess became alienated by the spirit of togetherness established in the rhetoric of the wartime politicians. Churchill's speeches promoted the 'we' over the 'I', encouraging an inclusive idea of nation against foreign intruders; his infamous speech, 'Victory, Victory At All Costs...' states 'Let us go forward together with our united strength.'<sup>1</sup> The very symbols that epitomised Englishness suddenly appeared frivolous and superficial against the horrific backdrop of bloody army operations, the large-scale devastation caused by the Blitz, and the looming spectre of foreign dictatorship.

In the aftermath of the War, the atmosphere of an all-inclusive England continued into the political agenda of Clement Attlee's Labour government of 1945. The unity of the previous decade generated a compassionate attitude towards the people worst affected by the devastation; the working classes were seen as having sacrificed a great deal for the ideals of freedom and Englishness, and thus the new political climate pledged an inclusive social system where they would become a far more visible entity. The transition from war to peacetime saw attempts at breaking down traditional class structures, a continued atmosphere of austerity through rationing, unfamiliar and modern architecture in the rebuilding of towns and cities, and an increase in foreign cultures due to an influx of refugees; the face of England was changing drastically, and Waugh could see no place for someone of his traditional, conservative ilk in this alien environment. Ian Baucom indicates the breakdown of identity as England was faced by a foreign 'Other'; '...for the subjects of both a nation and an empire, the task of "locating" English identity became even more complex as England struggled to define the relationship between the national "here" and the imperial "there".'<sup>2</sup> Although the political rhetoric of the Second World War endorsed a supposedly united country fighting against a common enemy, in reality the 'communal' experience of war and the development of a Welfare State wounded traditional pre-war senses of nationhood and generated deeper class divides; the upper classes became alienated from the 'mass' as their

<sup>1</sup> Winston Churchill, 'Victory, Victory At All Costs', speech to the House of Commons, 13 May 1940, in *Writing Englishness 1900-1950: An Introductory Sourcebook on National Identity*, eds. Judy Giles and Tim Middleton, (London: Routledge, 1995), p.129

<sup>2</sup> Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and Locations of Identity*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999) p.37

wealth and power declined, through the burden of their decaying country homes, increased taxes and the nationalisation of industry.

David Cannadine finds that ‘...(Waugh) set out to write a novel that would be a nostalgic lament for the aristocratic style of life which he believed the war had ended for good.’<sup>3</sup> However, Waugh is not simply lamenting the decline of traditional Englishness, aligning himself with the nostalgic upper classes; he recognises that this view of the past is superficial following the horrors of war, and whilst he cannot support an all-inclusive modernity, he can no more justify the naïve frivolity of the pre-war upper classes. By the time of the trilogy, Ian Littlewood remarks, ‘The tone is no longer indulgent; it is past time to grow out of these things...Waugh’s ultimate concern...is not to indulge nostalgia but to transcend it.’<sup>4</sup> If Waugh’s realist representation of Englishness is explored in a novel such as *Officers and Gentlemen*, it seems he is intentionally developing a negative image of this nostalgia for pre-war England; Waugh realises the England he yearns for was an ideal rather than a reality, a veneer of superficial values and one-dimensional symbols that masked deeper undercurrents of impending war, social disorder and irresponsible figures occupying powerful institutional positions. Waugh structures his stereotypes through use of a comic, farcical narrative, chaotic characterisation, and a manipulation of traditional allegories of Englishness. When tested, these stereotypes fall apart and expose their inherent problematic nature; seemingly positive representations of Englishness deconstruct in the same way that Waugh’s own belief in nostalgia was irreparably shattered by war.

Waugh manipulates typical representations of Englishness in *Officers and Gentlemen* through symbols associated with the privileged existence of the upper classes, and English heritage. A primary example is Guy Crouchback’s fascination with Sir Roger of Waybrooke, the knight of the Crusades buried in an Italian tomb, a figure of the values that Guy himself respects; honour, valour, chivalry. The knight’s tale is the key concern of the first scene in *Men At Arms*, as Guy prays for security in his impending journey back to England to re-enlist his military services. Sir Roger holds an almost religious fascination for Guy, reserving more respect for the dead knight’s guidance and morality than that of his military superiors; he equates Sir Roger with the spiritual counsel of God, ‘Now, on his last day, he made straight for the tomb and ran his finger, as the fishermen did, along the knight’s sword. “Sir Roger, pray for me,’ he said, ‘and for our endangered kingdom.’”<sup>5</sup> However, the reality of Sir Roger’s armed service falls short of the admiration Guy projects upon him; the knight never in fact reached the second Crusades, dying in a minor domestic operation in Italy. Guy views Sir Roger as the archetypal valiant warrior, battling for the Christian values of legendary England, but in reality the figure he reveres is merely a veneer of Englishness that never truly existed. Sir Roger died for the feudal, materialistic squabbles of forgotten Italian counts, unable to accomplish his personal moral crusade; Guy Crouchback’s own experience of war uncannily mirrors this sense of missed opportunity, in that despite his moral and patriotic intentions, he only experiences military action twice throughout the entire war, both in failed and bungled operations. B.W Wilson identifies that ‘Guy is not, in any sense, a modern man; and that is his problem, for he is bringing with him, into a modern world, the ideas and values of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.’<sup>6</sup> While Wilson is correct in illustrating Guy’s redundancy in a harsh modernity, the reality of Sir Roger’s failed career suggests that destructive human behaviour has existed since the time of the Crusades, and in this department, society has changed very little. Although Waugh recognises the social importance of Sir Roger’s moral values, these

<sup>3</sup> David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1990), p.635

<sup>4</sup> Ian Littlewood, *The Writings of Evelyn Waugh*, (Oxford: Blackwells, 1983), p.134-135

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Men At Arms*, (Middlesex: Penguin, 1975), p.13

<sup>6</sup> B.W Wilson, ‘Sword of Honour: The Last Crusade’ in *English* 23 (1974), p.88

are obsolete in the ruthless face of modernity, and therefore a nostalgic view of honourable upper class England is criticised as naïve.

Waugh utilises recognisable imagery of Englishness throughout *Officers and Gentlemen* to draw attention to the paradoxical relationship between the Englishness of political rhetoric and upper class memory, and the harsh reality of a society wounded by war. Winston Churchill was regarded by many as ‘the saviour of his country’, and his stirring patriotic speeches employed a passionate rhetoric that promoted the ideal of united England against an immoral foreign enemy. However, as David Cannadine highlights, Churchill ‘overnight...became once again what he had been in the 1930s, before his encounter with destiny: a marginal anachronism, an aristocratic antique.’<sup>7</sup> Churchill exemplified exactly the paradox Waugh wished to highlight in *Officers and Gentlemen*; the traditionalist, aristocratic, public- schooled gentleman attempting to reconcile his upper class background with the egalitarianism of an unromantic, war-blemished England. Waugh manipulates the rhetorical style of Churchill’s speeches in certain sections of the trilogy to emphasize the disparity between their elevated, symbolic message of Englishness, and the bungled, ineffectual war-effort of the novel’s army. This elevated stylistic borrowing is discernible at the end of Book One of *Officers and Gentlemen*, where Guy idealistically considers the figures of X Commando;

‘There was heroic simplicity in Eddie and Bertie...Guy remembered Claire as he first saw him in the Roman spring in the afternoon sunlight amid the embosoming cypresses of the Borghese Gardens, putting his horse faultlessly over the jumps, concentrated as a man in prayer. Ivor Claire, Guy thought, was the fine flower of them all. He was quintessential England, the man Hitler had not taken into account, Guy thought.’<sup>8</sup>

The first passage replicates Churchill’s reference to religious imagery, the heroic, the natural, and national identity versus the enemy Other, in articulate and passionate prose; these aspects are evident in his ‘We Shall Go On To The End...’ speech of 1940- ‘...we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be...we shall never surrender...in God’s good time...’<sup>9</sup>. If this elevated prose is considered alongside the exchange between Eddie and Bertie only a few lines previously, then the contrast in style becomes obvious;

“It’s brandy,’ said Bertie. ‘Rather horrible. Do you think, Colonel, we might send it up to the Booby?’

‘No.’

‘The only other thing I can think of is to throw it overboard before it makes us sick.’

‘Yes, I should do that.’

...

Eddie dropped the bottle over the rail and leant gazing after it.

‘I think I’m going to be sick all the same,’ he said.’<sup>10</sup>

This abrupt alteration in style is surely intentional, and is motivated by an attempt to juxtapose the symbolic, heroic representation of England in wartime political ideology with the irresponsible, undisciplined behaviour of the soldiers; Waugh employs humour and clipped dialogue to powerfully remonstrate with the former passage’s symbolism within the space of a few lines. Once again, Waugh dismantles an idealised, heroic allegory of

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.636

<sup>8</sup> Waugh, *Officers and Gentlemen*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p.114

<sup>9</sup> Winston Churchill, ‘We Shall Go On To The End...’ speech to the House of Commons, 4 June 1940, in *Writing Englishness 1900-1950*, ed. By Judy Giles and Tim Middleton, (London: Routledge, 1995), p.130-132

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.114

Englishness by countering it with the disordered ‘reality’ of modernity, testing the stereotypes he has created through his prose to remove the nostalgic, invented veneer.

Waugh explores conflict in modes of Englishness through creation of a chaotic narrative atmosphere, illustrated by a development of Waugh’s trademark comedic, farcical tone. Littlewood finds that Waugh’s humour becomes less farcical by the *Sword of Honour* trilogy, as there is no longer room for light-heartedness<sup>11</sup>; however, the humour is not muted across the novels, but becomes increasingly tinted with underlying gravity, and grim reality. Waugh’s depiction of the army is designed to represent a microcosm of a disordered society; farce is the appropriate mode to illustrate how the unfamiliarity and diversity of post-war modern Englishness has created a chaos in the formerly ordered social institutions. Frequently in *Officers and Gentlemen*, the figures in charge seem to have little idea of their responsibilities, leading to hilarious incompetent escapades that criticise the distribution of power in the armed forces, and more generally, in society. A primary example is the bumbling Major Hound, supposedly Guy’s superior, but in actuality a cowardly individual sarcastically nicknamed ‘Fido’; in the confusion during the crucial early stages of the dangerous Crete operation, Fido’s mind wanders-

‘Major Hound had eaten nothing since he put to sea. His first thought, as headquarters came to life at dawn, was of food.

“Time we were brewing up, Corporal Major.”

“Captain Roots and his ration party have not returned, sir.”

“No tea?”

... Major Hound’s second thought was of his personal appearance. He opened his haversack, propped a looking glass against a boulder, smeared his face with sticky matter from a tube, and began to shave.’<sup>12</sup>

Major Hound is clearly resourceful, though perhaps not in the departments usually expected of an Army Major. Littlewood feels that Waugh’s careless comedy is replaced largely by solemnity in *The Sword of Honour* trilogy; ‘...the progress of the war was the decisive source of any bitterness that became mingled with (the comedy)...wartime accentuates the grimness, the seriousness, and outside the battle zones, the tedium of life...’<sup>13</sup> A farcical, comic tone lent to scenes depicting the horror of war is apt for a writer disillusioned by England; Waugh creates a sinister feel to superficially light-hearted comedy in recognition that beneath the jubilation of victory, England’s nationhood has been irreparably damaged.

Waugh imitates the ‘inclusive’ nature of post-war society by invoking a recognisable milieu of character stereotypes, designed to highlight various characteristics of Englishness. Waugh’s characters are portrayed as superficially affable, but when dissected, their inherent personality flaws are exposed; few escape Waugh’s critical eye, regardless of their social status. This chaotic hotch-potch of characters as the nucleus of the English war effort illustrates the crisis of identity catalysed by war, and the loss of a cohesive sense of nationhood despite the move towards an inclusive social atmosphere. The lower class character of Trimmer is Waugh’s prime example of the ‘we’ figure of Churchill’s speeches; but once again, Trimmer represents a surface veneer that is completely at odds with his true **personality, constructing a fake brand of Englishness. Giles and Middleton illustrate that** wartime English identity ‘...was constantly debated, re-worked and re-formulated: the 1940s idea of “a people’s war” to combat Nazi Germany was a very different (and notably

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp.59-64

<sup>12</sup> Waugh, *Officers and Gentlemen*, p.174

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp.59-60

more inclusive) concept than that of the “hero’s war” of 1914.’<sup>14</sup>; Trimmer combines these two ideals to become ‘The People’s Hero’ of War War II. The entire invention is masterminded by Ian Kilbannock and General Whale to reinvigorate public support of the armed forces, and Waugh brilliantly offsets this construction of a war hero with the true characterisation of Trimmer as a ridiculous, cowardly personality. Kilbannock attempts in vain to present his dashing British war hero to the American press, as Waugh humorously exhibits the superficial veneer of national identity, and the opposite reality of Trimmer’s characterisation;

“‘Night and day,’ crooned Trimmer, ‘you are the one. Only you beneath the moon and under the sun, in the roaring traffic’s boom-’

‘Listen,’ said Ian Kilbannock severely, ‘you are coming to the Savoy to meet the American Press.’

‘In the silence of my lonely room I think of you.’

‘*Trimmer.*’

...

‘Trimmer, if you don’t stop warbling I shall recommend your return to regimental duties in Iceland.’<sup>15</sup>

Trimmer is completely disinterested in his status as a symbol of national identity, but to the press and the English public he is the hero of the ‘Popgun’ operation, supposedly a living example of the army’s sacrifice for the nation’s liberty.

Lower class figures such as Trimmer and Ludovic are not exclusively painted with Waugh’s distaste; he extends this to characters of the upper classes, as if to create a general ambience of negativity. Waugh seems to have reserved the most unpleasant traits for the upper class characters, such as the poisonous Julia Stitch. Stitch is unattractive in the light of war because ‘It never occurs to her to consider herself bound by the regulations that govern everyone else or bother about the consequences of ignoring them.’<sup>16</sup> Waugh makes her disregard for rules appear endearing in the earlier *Scoop*<sup>17</sup>(1938); later, his distaste for her conduct more powerful. Her real malice emerges at the end of *Officers and Gentlemen*, as she deviously discards the identity tags of the unknown dead soldier; ‘Mrs Stitch took the envelope. She noted the address. Then she fondly kissed Guy...As he drove away she waved the envelope; then turned indoors and dropped it into a waste-paper basket. Her eyes were one immense sea, full of flying galleys.’<sup>18</sup> The cold and calculated atmosphere of the prose illustrates the hardened cruelty of Julia Stitch’s character, a selfish and immoral figure despite her privileged social position. A similar treatment emerges through Ivor Claire, a strangely effeminate individual, recalling a sense of the snake in the Garden of Eden; his appearance is fascinating and his attitude enticing, but he represents a moral downfall, a temptation to sin that Guy finally manages to resist. He is often associated with natural, spiritual imagery recalling the analogy of Eden, evident in the ‘...embosoming cypresses of the Borghese Gardens...’, and later, following the surrender of the Crete operation, ‘Guy could see him clearly in the moonlight, the austere face, haggard now but calm and recollected, as he had first seen it in the Borghese Gardens. It was his last sight of him.’<sup>19</sup> His description is not overtly negative, but there seems to be a feeling of wariness or suspicion about Claire. When it later transpires that he deserted his fellow soldiers to save his own life, Claire’s earlier

<sup>14</sup> Giles and Middleton, eds., *Writing Englishness: 1900-1950...*p.110

<sup>15</sup> Waugh, *Officers and Gentlemen*, p.212

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.41

<sup>17</sup> Waugh, *Scoop: A Novel About Journalists*, (London: Penguin, 2003)

<sup>18</sup> Waugh, *Officers and Gentlemen*, p.244

<sup>19</sup> Waugh, *Officers and Gentlemen*, p. 221

representation as a well-mannered gentleman is dramatically exposed as another falsity; Guy is made to realise the façade that has been his experience of warfare, ‘He had no old love for Ivor, no liking at all, for the man who had been his friend had proved to be an illusion. He had a sense too, that all war consisted in causing trouble without much hope of advantage.’<sup>20</sup> Waugh’s unpleasant, English, upper-class characters illustrate their post-war declining popularity seems to be directly caused by the unspeakable, brutal behaviour of their wartime experiences. As B.W. Wilson considers, battle-hardened England and its empire has become ‘...a world where personal considerations have advanced far ahead of any noble sacrifices...’<sup>21</sup> The stereotypical values of Englishness collapse in this cruel new world, and alternatively the upper class turn to immorality and a ‘survival-of-the-fittest’ mentality to preserve some sense of influence. Meanwhile, the lower classes are ordered into a false construct of unity, but ultimately fall apart as the ‘reality’ they are founded upon is frail. Perhaps Waugh is suggesting through his varied characterisation that the sole aspect uniting these figures, and warranting a label of ‘Englishness’, is a lack of morality, and a move towards superficiality.

The haunting exchange between Madam Kanyi and Guy at the end of the trilogy exemplify Waugh’s post-war issue with a nostalgic perspective of upper-class Englishness; “Even good men thought their private honour would be satisfied by war. They could assert their manhood by killing and being killed. They would accept hardships in recompense for having been selfish and lazy. Danger justified privilege...”

“God forgive me,’ said Guy. ‘I was one of them.’”<sup>22</sup>

The real world of Waugh’s post-war experience is one that rejects the heroic, upper class notion of Englishness as outdated and elitist. In *The Sword of Honour* trilogy, Waugh recognises that the atrocities of war could not mask the flimsiness of upper-class Englishness; the superficiality of their constructed identity collapsed when tested by something real and merciless. Churchill’s speeches of victory promised compensation in the form of a united affirmation of Englishness; the reality was that the jubilation was a veneer without foundation, like the nostalgic mode of Englishness Waugh had based his pre-war life upon. The upper-class networks of Englishness had considered themselves above the normal rules, powerful enough to withstand the infiltration of the lower classes into their locale. In the end, the soul-destroying impact of modern warfare was so all-consuming and violent that not even the identity of the victorious nation could survive.

<sup>20</sup> Waugh, *Officers and Gentlemen*, p.238-239

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p.88

<sup>22</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Unconditional Surrender*, (Middlesex: Penguin, 1964), p.232

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