

EVELYN WAUGH STUDIES

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CONTENTS

REVIEWS

[Saintly Empress and Imperial Saint](#) 2

Helena: Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh, edited by Sara Haslam.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Manley

[NEWS](#)

REVIEWS

Saintly Empress and Imperial Saint

Helena: Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh, by Evelyn Waugh, Volume 11, Sara Haslam, ed., Oxford: OUP, 2020. 377 pp. £65/\$85.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Manley

This is the second novel to be issued in the OUP's ongoing *Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh* series. The first (*Vile Bodies*) was published over three years ago, so it has been much awaited, and is worth the wait. *Helena* is noted both as Waugh's only historical novel as well as the one that took him the longest to write. As explained in the volume's "History of the Text" section, he began the book in 1945, right after *Brideshead Revisited* was published, and it was issued 5 years later in 1950. The delay was due to Waugh's changing his mind and putting it aside.

He began with the idea of writing a "Saint's life," following the formula of Roman Catholic hagiography, but, after doing a considerable amount of historical research, soon gave that up. After writing in what was probably a serious style starting in May 1945, he put it aside and picked it up again at the end of the year. By then, he had decided to write it as a historical novel rather than a Saint's life. I thought he announced in a diary entry or letter the exact point at which that decision was made (after a disappointing and unproductive weekend at Chagford), but if he did, I can't find it, and nor apparently did the editor, Sara Haslam.

Waugh does, however, mention in some detail his continuing research and his outreach to friends, historians and religious scholars to make sure he correctly describes the relatively few established historical facts. This topic is thoroughly covered in the introduction. The most well-known results of this outreach are probably those reflected at the beginning of the novel, where Helena's adolescent horse riding is described, and near the end, when she has a dream in which she learns the location of the true cross from the Wandering Jew. I therefore reread these sections rather carefully to see how the explanatory materials in the book dealt with them.

Evelyn Waugh Studies 3

In the case of the teenaged horse riding, Waugh used Penelope Betjeman as both a character and a factual source. He modeled the young Helena growing up in Roman England on her. He also asked John Betjeman to pass on some questions to her about “adolescent sex reveries connected with riding,” something about which neither Waugh nor his own wife knew anything. He had apparently mentioned this to Betjeman before he wrote a letter to him in May 1945, in which the subject was raised again. This was the period of Penelope’s conversion to Roman Catholicism, and the Betjemans were probably not very communicative with each other. In any event, Waugh later asked Penelope directly why she had not replied, and she said it was the first she’d heard about the *Helena* project.

This incident in the context of the book’s composition is the one I had best remembered from Martin Stannard’s narrative description of it in his biography, but in the *Complete Works* edition it is dealt with in several different places scattered throughout the book. Although it does get mentioned several times, one of the best parts of that story is left out. The subject is first addressed in the “Genesis of the Text” (xxxv-xxxviii), then again in “Publication History” (1-li), and in a long contextual note attached to the book’s dedication to Penelope Betjeman (123), and finally in some footnotes to that note on the very last page (283). Most of the story is there but it is missing the quotation of Penelope’s response to Waugh’s query as had appeared in Stannard’s biography (vol. 2, 158). Waugh had apparently written an early version of that horse-riding scene that appeared in an excerpt in *The Tablet* before he had the opportunity to discuss it with Penelope, but how (if at all) her own version may have influenced him to change that passage in future editions is not explained (or if it is, I missed it). One may be able to do so based on the various textual versions described in the book’s detailed “Manuscript Development” appendix, but to get my answer, it was easier to go back to Martin Stannard’s text where an excerpt from her reply is quoted.¹

Another problem arises from comparisons of *The Tablet*’s extract with the published book. The extract appeared very early in the book’s development process (December 1945), but the *CWEW* edition explains that Waugh played little role in the editing of it. Since he did not exercise editorial supervision, no attempt is made to track changes between that text and the one

¹ The *CWEW* version’s editor, Sara Haslam, refers in another context to a limitation on quotations in editorial matter, and this may explain the omission of a quotation from Penelope’s letter.

printed 5 years later (lxxxii). *The Tablet's* text is, however, described in some detail in the *CWEW* introduction, and several differences are noted (li-lii). It says that the description of the horse-riding scene in *The Tablet's* extract is the same as that in the manuscript used for textual comparison (168-71). There are a considerable number of changes noted but which ones may be attributed to Penelope are not (and perhaps cannot be) identified.

The other section I remembered well from previous readings was the narrative describing Helena's dream of her meeting with the Wandering Jew. This comes near the end of the story. In writing it, Waugh reached out to his brother Alec's friend Robert Henriques and to a Jewish history scholar, Professor Arthur Marmorstein in Golders Green, to assure he got the historic facts right. It is one of the book's more amusing passages, and the *CWEW* edition points out something I had not realized before.

Waugh based much of the Wandering Jew's character on Brian Howard, who had also made major contributions to characters in his earlier novels: Ambrose Silk (*Put Out More Flags*) and Anthony Blanche (*Brideshead Revisited*). He admitted as much in a cited letter to Nancy Mitford, and in *Brideshead* itself he had compared the "nomad" Blanche to the Wandering Jew (lxv, n. 152). After reading that passage, I realized how much the Wandering Jew's conversational mannerisms resembled those of Blanche. The passage did not appear in *The Tablet's* excerpt, and while it may have appeared in the later excerpts in *The Month*, there doesn't seem to have been much of a struggle with the text in the development of that narrative (252-53). Waugh had by this time mastered Brian Howard's speech idiosyncrasies.²

Waugh succeeded in turning what could have been a religious tract similar to *Edmund Campion* into an amusing, historical novel. The religious theme looms in the background as the Roman Empire moves toward adoption of Christianity. Both Helena and her son Constantine convert but do so quietly. Helena's conversion is hardly noticed. Constantine dithers and leaves it until his death that takes place off-screen, so to speak, and without the melodrama such as that which characterized the conversions in *Brideshead Revisited*. One of the American reviewers, Harry Sylvester, a noted Roman Catholic novelist of the time who had met Waugh on his recent

² According to Sara Haslam, on the other hand, the relative cleanness of these pages of the manuscript suggests "that they are a fair autograph copy of a heavily corrected text." (xlv)

lecture tour of the USA, complained about the lack of detail regarding religious matters such as conversion (lxx), but I think on the whole Waugh probably got it about right in this case.

The book's publication history and its critical reception receive the usual *CWEW* attention to detail. In this case the US and UK editions came out within a week of each other. Waugh was not expecting much success in the US market and, as usual, played little role in the production of the US copy. He did, however, make a promotional trip to New York in connection with the book's publication. As part of that trip, he was a guest of Henry and Claire Boothe Luce.

One thing that came out of that visit was his success in obtaining Luce's agreement to finance a trip to the Holy Land. This was sponsored by Luce's *Life* magazine in which the article Waugh wrote about the trip that appeared as "The Plight of the Holy Places" (24 December 1951). There was also a later UK publication of the article in *The Month* (March 1952). In addition, a limited-issue book was published by Ian Fleming's Queen Anne Press (*The Holy Places*: London, 1952; New York, 1953). The idea for that trip and article must have been inspired to some extent by Waugh's writing of *Helena*, since he was in a sense retracing her footsteps, as he had described them in his fictional account in the novel. Indeed, the book edition of *The Holy Places* opens with a brief essay ("St. Helena Empress") on her role in preservation of the sites he is about to describe. This article had appeared separately in the UK, also in *The Month*, and was based on a BBC talk (*EAR*, 407). It did not appear in *Life* magazine. These later works are mentioned several times in the *CWEW* edition, but no systematic effort is made to determine what connection there may be between *The Holy Places* and the novel.

An opportunity may have been lost here in not including the contents of *The Holy Places* in the *Helena* volume of *CWEW*. Since they did appear in book form, an argument could be made for their inclusion in this volume. "St. Helena Empress" contrasts her life as well as Constantine's with those usually associated with Christian saints. They were not poor nor were they persecuted or martyred for their faith. Indeed, they were comfortably well off and well known, yet their contributions to the faith--the "Invention" of the Holy Cross and the conversion of the Roman Empire--were no less important than those of impoverished or persecuted saints of the more traditional variety. In a sense, the two essays in *The Holy Places*, although classified as

“non-fiction,” form part of the same project, both chronologically and thematically, as the fictional writing of Helena’s life.³

Another important publication fact is duly emphasized. While the book did not sell enough in Britain to warrant reprinting, in the US it was briefly a bestseller, with several reprintings within the 12 months of publication. This is explained by the US’ huge Roman Catholic population. It can’t have hurt, moreover, that Waugh’s two most recent novels (*Brideshead* and *The Loved One*) had also been bestsellers in America. The US publisher Little, Brown was aware of these factors and took advantage of them in its sales and marketing to make the book a bigger commercial success in the US than it was in the UK. They had sold nearly 16,000 copies in the US by early 1951 (lix, lxxxi-lxxxiii).

Little, Brown made some editorial improvements and revisions that appeared in the US version but not the UK’s. For example, Waugh at one point intended to divide the longer Chapter VIII into two subchapters; he then changed his mind but apparently forgot to delete the “2” on page 80 where the second subchapter was intended to begin. The US version corrects this by eliminating the “2,” making it one long chapter. The English versions still have the inconsistency, even in the Penguin reprints. Waugh does not seem to have commented on Little, Brown’s editorial changes, none of which was major, as described in the *CWEW* (lvi-lviii, lxxxii-lxxxiii).⁴ Finally, as was so often the case, Waugh made last-minute changes in the text (particularly the ending) that were too late to be included in the US version. Whether they were included in subsequent US printings isn’t noted.

Waugh did not, so far as I am aware, produce a revised edition of the novel as he did for others, including its predecessor *The Loved One*. These usually included an author’s “Preface” in which the extent and nature of the revisions were briefly noted. Indeed, *Helena* does not appear to have been reprinted in the UK until the Penguin edition was issued in 1963 (in which the

³ The contents of *The Holy Places* will presumably be included in *CWEW* vol. 28: *Essays Articles and Reviews 1946-1955*. This will probably include a comparison of variant texts, as the essays appeared in two magazines, a radio broadcast and a book.

⁴ I can’t be the only one to find this Roman numerical pagination of the *CWEW* introductory text annoying. There must have been discussions of alternatives to distinguish it from the regular text (such as putting a letter in front of Arabic numerals) without the distraction of following longer Roman versions. Using such an alternative, this reference might read “A56-58, A82-83.” The “original front matter” from the published book could then have been paginated using Roman numerals or **B1-B6**.

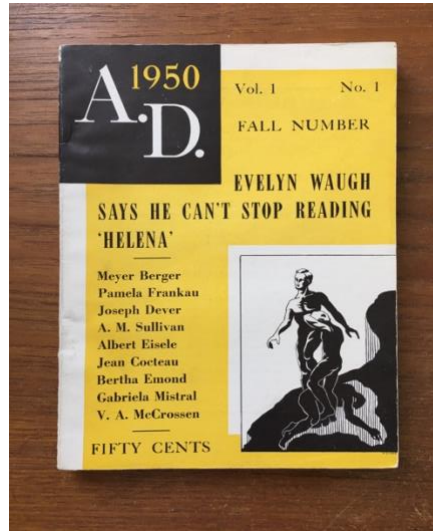
stranded subchapter heading is retained). It was later reissued in Penguin Modern Classic and Twentieth Century Classic editions, as well as a hardback reprint in 2011.⁵

The “Critical Reception” section is well done and treats the US and UK reactions separately. The UK reviewers include the usual voices. Peter Quennell gave the book such a positive notice that it warranted being named the *Daily Mail* book of the month. This resulted in the commissioning of a special wrap-around publicity band, as illustrated in the *CWEW* edition (lxviii). The US reviews were more of a mixture and, as Waugh had foreseen, several reviewers did not understand the book. One example is cited in an interview of Waugh during his October 1950 US publicity tour. This produced a “jaundiced account” of the book in a relatively obscure publication called *A. D. (Anno Domini)* that should have been a receptive audience. The interview is probably little known among Waugh readers. Although it was reprinted in volume 19 of *CWEW* along with his other interviews, that source is not cross-referenced in the current volume.

Waugh’s interview appeared in Vol. 1, Number 1 of *A. D.* magazine. There were three volumes of this literary journal published between 1950 and 1952 (according to the NYPL catalogue). It was published by A. D. Literary Associates, with offices on Roosevelt Avenue in Flushing, Queens. The magazine is described in the introductory issue (where Waugh’s interview appeared) as having been founded by “a group of Thomistic realists who, in spite of many faults, have something to say to their own generation, here and now” (9). One of this group was Waugh’s friend Anne Fremantle, who was also one of the magazine’s editors.⁶ Her involvement probably explains Waugh’s willingness to be interviewed by an otherwise unknown American publication.

⁵ The *CWEW* edition (lxxxii) says that the Penguin deal was a “fairly recent one” and important to Waugh financially. It is not clear in that context what “deal” with Penguin is being described. Waugh had been published by Penguin since the 1930s and, as one of their most popular authors, he was part of Penguin’s early 1950s promotion to have 10 of his books published (or republished) simultaneously in a uniform Penguin format. There may have been a separate deal relating to *Helena*, but there is no specific reference to it.

⁶ Fremantle wrote the theatre reviews in this first issue (117-18).



One of the interviewers was a priest, Demetrius Manousos (presumably Roman Catholic), who is credited with several books, including a child's version of the life of Edmund Campion. He also wrote a brief review of *Helena*, along with other recent fiction. His discussion of *Helena* ends with this:

Every scene has a symbolic overtone. More often than not those overtones are satirical, poking fun at some pretension of later history or modern times. (Was *Time* magazine, by the way, showing its age when it complained recently that there was no satire in *Helena*?) This is the way satire should be, delicate yet pointed. Only once, when Lactantius speaks of some future historian and looks at a pet gibbon, does the satire of *Helena* descend to the level of *The Loved One*. (115-16)

One notable omission from the critical reception discussion is the review in the *Times Literary Supplement* for 14 October 1950. This unsigned review was written by Anthony Powell, who was at that time the *TLS* fiction editor. Powell and Waugh were close friends in London during the late 1920s when Powell was responsible for Waugh's first break into book publishing. They had drifted apart in the 1930s and 1940s after Waugh's divorce when Powell remained a close friend of Waugh's ex-wife and her second husband John Heygate, but remained on cordial terms. They came together again as friends in the early 1950s when Powell moved to Somerset. Powell's review, written before the restoration of their friendship, was decidedly lukewarm. As he saw it, the themes of

...Christian legend, classical myth and Roman history [...] required all Waugh's ingenuity to weld into a workmanlike novel. [...] Although the narrative moves quickly, the reader suffers moments of uneasiness at the spasmodic course taken by the story; and the final impression is not one of entire satisfaction.

After a brief summary of the story and a comparison with Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, the review concludes:

...in this novel, learning, obliquity and delicacy never quite manage to fuse with simplicity in the manner that such a work as *Helena* by its nature requires.

Whether Waugh knew Powell had written this review is unclear, although he would have been aware that Powell was fiction editor. Waugh would not have been surprised that Powell would not like the book, as Powell had no interest in organized religion or the period of history in which the story is set. After they re-established friendly relations, I don't recall any mention between them of this book or Powell's review. Waugh became a dedicated admirer of Powell's multi-volume novel *A Dance to the Music of Time* that started to appear in 1951, and Powell reciprocated by being a virtually lone voice from their generation in seeking to restore and promote Waugh's reputation as a writer during the years immediately following Waugh's death in 1966.

One example of the novel's "spasmodic course" noted by Powell is the lack of historical context during the period between Helena's divorce and Constantine's imperial accession. Waugh seems to assume the reader will have learned about these details elsewhere. The *CWEW* edition provides these in a form that is both concise and sufficiently detailed to put matters into an understandable historic context. For example, the contextual note on 122-23 provides an update on Constantine's career that is missing from Waugh's narrative. Sometimes one misses such references in the first passage where they are relevant (as happened to me in this case). This is due to there being no textual indicator such as a number or an asterisk, but the editors have helpfully provided cross-references at later points where such historical notes again become relevant.

In general, however, there seem to be far too many cross-references in the text and notes, causing notation fatigue on the part of the reader. I believe this is due to the lack of an index that

would, in the normal course, be available to point the reader back to where a historic or literary event or character is first described, either in the fictional or editorial content. That this is a historical novel probably also contributes to the need for more than the usual number of cross-references. It is unfortunate that the editors or publishers have decided to dispense with an index in the fictional volumes of the *CWEW*. The indices provided in the other (non-fiction) volumes are quite helpful.

Aside from that quibble, the book is well-produced, up to the high printing and editorial standards reflected in the earlier volumes of this series. It is a welcome addition to the *Complete Works* project and is entitled to receive critical support for one of Waugh's books that has been sadly and unjustifiably neglected.

NEWS

John H. Wilson Jr. Evelyn Waugh Undergraduate Essay Contest

Submissions are welcome for the John H. Wilson Jr. Evelyn Waugh Undergraduate Essay Contest. Essays (normally limited to 20 pages or 5000 words) are invited on any aspect of Waugh's life or work and will be judged by the *Evelyn Waugh Studies* editorial board. The winning essay will be published in the journal, and the author will receive a prize of \$500. Deadline: 31 December 2020. Email submissions to jpitcher@bennington.edu and yuexi.liu@xjtlu.edu.cn.

Tribute to Lady Morrison

<https://www.worcesternews.co.uk/news/18853031.moving-tribute-rosalind-morrison-vice-lord-lieutenant-worcestershire-cathedral-bells-rung/>

The Folio Book of Humor

It might seem odd for a book of humor to be packaged in such a serious and buttoned-down way — cloth bound, with a slipcase, no illustrations to speak of. But the design fits the content beautifully. This is no collection of jokes, but an anthology of delightful oddities, excerpts from Thackeray and Evelyn Waugh and Dorothy Parker and James Thurber and more. It's heavily weighted toward the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the excerpts are more witty and wry than side-splittingly funny. A great book for a discerning reader.

<https://www.startribune.com/bookmark-showy-big-books-just-made-for-giving/573211981/>

***Brideshead* Remake**

<https://www.popsugar.com/entertainment/brideshead-revisited-remake-details-48013690>

Arthur Calder-Marshall

It was Calder-Marshall who Alec Waugh contacted to keep an eye on his difficult younger brother Evelyn during his visit to Mexico in 1940.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/dec/01/arthur-calder-marshall-the-way-to-santiago-orson-welles>

The Media and Ethiopia, Now

<https://ghionjournal.com/how-western-media-and-others-are-still-failing-ethiopia/>

Tories and Sexism

I don't read many books by women.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/i-discovered-the-appalling-sexism-faced-by-tory-women-after-i-married-an-mp-n85nsq50p>

***Sybille Bedford* by Selina Hastings**

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/nov/18/sybille-bedford-by-selina-hastings-review-a-huge-appetite-for-life>

Shaun Usher's *Letters of Note*

Among the other missives in Usher's 'Love' collection, there's this from 33-year-old Evelyn Waugh, who, while waiting impatiently for the annulment of his first marriage, wrote to his soon-to-be ex-wife's 19-year-old cousin a self-proclaimed 'lousy

proposition': 'I can't advise you in my favor because I think it would be beastly for you, but think how nice it would be for me. I am restless & moody & misanthropic & lazy & have no money except what I earn and if I got ill you would starve.' They married, stayed together 30 years, and had seven children.

<https://datebook.sfchronicle.com/books/the-lost-art-of-letter-writing-in-books>

***The Glorious Guinness Girls* by Emily Hourican**

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/book-review-the-glorious-guinness-girls-by-emily-hourican-5w3s2g5tb>

Drama and Religion

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/2020/11/12/drama-now-afraid-religion-poorer/>

The Beckhams and Charvet

Joseph-Christophe Charvet's eponymous brand opened its doors in 1838 on the Place Vendôme in Paris, producing some of the finest silk shirts and ties known to man. The brand became the go-to for members of royal families the world over, from Edward VII and Spain's Alfonso XII to Charles Baudelaire and Marcel Proust. Aristocrat Lord Sebastian Flyte of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* was also a fan, and wore 'dove-grey flannel, white crepe-de-Chine shirt, a Charvet tie'.

<https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/fashion/article/david-beckham-pyjamas>

Evelyn Waugh Society

The Waugh Society has 190 members. To join, please go to <http://evelynwaughsociety.org/>.

The Evelyn Waugh Discussion List has 78 members. To join, please visit

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Evelyn_Waugh.

The Evelyn Waugh Society is also on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/evelynwaughsoc>.

The Waugh Society is providing an RSS feed: <http://evelynwaughsociety.org/feed>.

And the Waugh Society's web site has opportunities for threaded discussions:

<http://evelynwaughsociety.org/forums/>.

Submission Guidelines

Essays as well as notes and news about Waugh and his work may be submitted to *Evelyn Waugh Studies* by mail or email to jpitcher@bennington.edu and yuexi.liu@xjtlu.edu.cn. Submissions should follow MLA style and be no more than 5000 words in length. Since most readers will be familiar with Waugh's work, authors should minimize unnecessary quotations and explanatory references. All submitted essays are first screened by the Editors and if deemed acceptable for publication are then sent to Associate Editors for further review. Authors should expect to be notified of the editor's final decision within twelve weeks of submission.

End of *Evelyn Waugh Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 2

Home Page (Evelyn Waugh Society)

Back Issues (University of Leicester)