



Evelyn Waugh's *Edmund Campion*: 'Walking at our elbow'

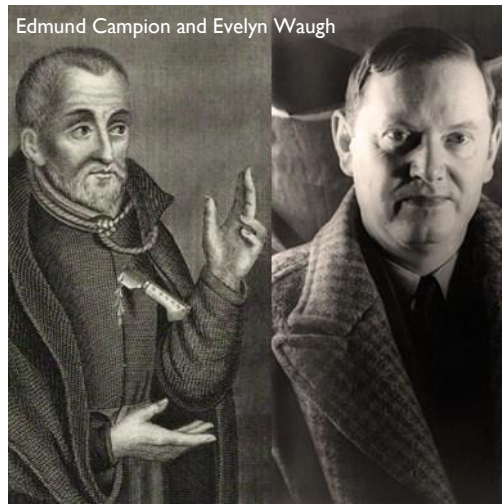
Gerard Kilroy

How did the patron saint of the Jesuits in Britain, who was martyred on 1 December 1581, transform the life of one England's most celebrated authors nearly 400 years later? Gerard Kilroy, the co-editor of a new edition of Evelyn Waugh's *Edmund Campion*, describes the motivations behind and evolution of Waugh's 'work of imaginative literature'.

Thomas More and John Fisher were canonised by Pope Pius XI on 19 May 1935; in the same month, Evelyn Waugh finished writing his gripping account of Edmund Campion. When Longmans published the third, and by far the most elegant, English edition in 1961, with a woodcut by Reynolds Stone, the process for canonising Campion and the other Forty Martyrs was on the final straight; Margaret, Waugh's favourite daughter, was helping Fr Philip Caraman SJ, the Vice-Postulator, at Farm Street. *Edmund Campion* is a book that evolved through six editions (including the Penguin) over 25 years: a brief period of confidence for English Catholicism, finally free to acclaim publicly its Henrician and Elizabethan martyrs after four centuries of politically tactful silence.

The book is rightly dedicated to Fr Martin D'Arcy SJ (1888–1976), the charismatic Master of Campion Hall: it was D'Arcy who suggested the subject to Waugh in 1934. Since D'Arcy was trying to raise £30,000 to fund the building of the new Campion Hall designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869–1944), Waugh immediately offered all future royalties to the Hall, and its *Liber Benefactorum* reveals frequent entries of large donations (especially after the first American edition of 1946) totalling at least £1,200. 'I wished to do something,' Waugh wrote in the 'Preface' to the third edition, 'to mark my joy in the occasion and my gratitude to the then Master, to whom, under God, I owe my faith.'¹

This was no exaggeration. D'Arcy had instructed Waugh, received him into the Church on 29 September 1930 and, in 1933, invited him to join the large party of Catholic converts he had assembled on the Hellenic



cruise ship, *Kralijca Marija* ('Queen Mary'). This unlikely idea was inspired: D'Arcy thereby diverted Waugh's life from what could best be described as despondent debauchery and introduced him to two women who were to transform his life.

Katharine Asquith (1885–1976) was the widow of Raymond Asquith, the Prime Minister's brilliant son who had been killed in the Battle of the Somme.² Waugh quickly fell under her spell; she expressed strong views but so combined them with charm and kindness that they did not offend, and told him that his skills as a writer were wasted on inferior subject matter. He was already under fire from the Editor of *The Tablet*, Ernest Oldmeadow, who had pronounced *Black Mischief* (1933), 'a disgrace to anybody professing the Catholic name'.³ When *A Handful of Dust* was published on 4 September 1934 to great acclaim, Katharine urged Waugh to write something more uplifting than that 'brilliant', but depressing book. She expressed how 'miserable' she felt after reading about people like Brenda, who 'aren't worth satirising'; she was consoled by the fact that 'Campion is coming'.⁴ Waugh remained vividly aware of Katharine's exacting standards throughout his life, as his dedications in her copies of his books show. Even after the publication of *Brideshead Revisited*, she was to write on 1 January 1945, 'O Evelyn do do do write a book not a novel'.⁵

Also on board the *Kralijca Marija* were Mary Herbert (1889-1970) and her daughter, Gabriel, who invited Waugh to join them in their house in Portofino. It was here, in September 1933, that Waugh first met Gabriel's younger sister, Laura, then aged seventeen. Waugh

described Altachiara as ‘a very dangerous house ... full of wasps, horseflies and mosquitoes’, but he was assiduously polite to his ‘very decent hostess’, another formidable Catholic convert, even though she pelted him with hard Italian rolls for ‘being rude about Ireland’.⁶ Nevertheless, he was soon made to feel at home in her English house, Pixton Park, with its shabby sofas, dogs jumping through windows and a large group of the lively young. After his third visit over Christmas 1934 (shortly after he had begun writing *Edmund Campion*), he wrote that he had taken ‘a great fancy’ to Laura: ‘only 18 years old, virgin, Catholic, quiet and astute’.⁷ Waugh’s credentials as a Catholic suitor were not good. He had applied in 1933 for the annulment of his first marriage, to Laura’s first cousin, Evelyn Gardner (She-Evelyn), but the process had stalled, and the papers were gathering dust in Westminster.⁸

Waugh tells us, on the book’s last page, that he wrote *Edmund Campion* between October 1934 and May 1935 at three country houses, ‘Mells – Belton – Newton Ferrers’.⁹ Actually, he did much of the writing before Christmas 1934 in his bolthole, the Easton Court Hotel, Chagford (where, ten years later, he wrote *Brideshead Revisited*).¹⁰ By September 1935 he had sent 50 signed copies of the first edition to friends like Hilaire Belloc, Lady Diana Cooper and Lady Pansy Lamb, and the book was publicly advertised in October for the price of 6s 6d.

It was an immediate success and, by a remarkable concurrence of dates, Evelyn Waugh received the Hawthornden Prize for ‘a work of imaginative literature’ on 24 June 1936 – it was on the same date in 1580, the feast of John the Baptist, that a fair wind enabled Campion to cross the Channel. Two days after this accolade, Waugh attended the official opening of Campion Hall by the Duke of Alba, and two weeks later he received a telegram from Mgr (later Cardinal) Godfrey, sent from Rome, telling him that his annulment had finally come through: ‘Decision favourable. Godfrey.’¹¹ By the time Waugh married Laura Herbert on 17 April 1937, *Edmund Campion* had sealed both his friendship with D’Arcy and his involvement in the life of the Hall, and established his own inclusion in what Waugh called (in a phrase borrowed from Campion’s scaffold utterance) the ‘Household of the Faith’.

If the writing of *Edmund Campion* was a grace-filled twitch on the thread of Evelyn Waugh’s life, several things conspired fundamentally to transform the shape

of the book, and to enhance its impact. In 1939, Waugh visited Mexico: he was shocked by the ‘anarchy’ of the regime and the long history of violent oppression of Catholicism that stretched back to the 1920s. Secondly, Waugh was in Croatia in 1944, and became passionately involved in the present sufferings and future dangers for Croatian Catholics under a communist regime. His prescient report, ‘Church and State in Liberated Croatia’, presented in March 1945, was suppressed by the Foreign Office: Tito, like Stalin, was now Britain’s ally.

In July 1945, *Brideshead Revisited* catapulted Waugh to fame and fortune, especially in the United States, and Waugh asked his American and British agents ‘to cash in’ on this by issuing a new edition of *Edmund Campion*.¹² For the American edition of 1946, Waugh asked Little, Brown and Company to remove the ‘Notes’ and ‘List of Books Consulted’ (he told the Penguin editor in 1953 that he had ‘long been greatly ashamed of the Notes to Campion’). He also replaced the scrappy ‘Author’s Note’ with a beautifully written ‘Preface’.¹³ The result of these changes is to shift the focus from the wholly biased Elizabethan history to the heart of the book: the portrait of the understated glamour and chivalrous heroism of Campion’s priestly ministry. Waugh now sees Campion as the victim not of a moribund Elizabethan regime and servile Church but of the secular state. As Michael Brennan has shown, Waugh was here influenced by Graham Greene, whose own book on Mexico, *The Lawless Roads* (1939), had argued that the totalitarian state always behaves the same way, in ‘the time of Elizabeth in England, just as much as in Mexico’.¹⁴ It was D’Arcy who advised Fr Philip Caraman SJ to translate the autobiography of the Elizabethan Jesuit, John Gerard (and appears to have suggested Greene for the Introduction when Waugh turned the job down), while Greene himself relied heavily on Waugh’s portrait of Campion.¹⁵ Waugh’s ‘Preface’ is, therefore, a reflection of an extraordinary moment in English literary history, where two of England’s finest novelists, each recruited by D’Arcy, now turned the full force of their scorn on the hypocrisy of the totalitarian state and their religious focus on the grace-filled, joyful acceptance of death as the unique feature of Christian martyrdom.¹⁶ Instead of criticising the ‘Cis-alpine’ sympathies of Richard Simpson’s earlier biography of Campion, as he had done in 1935, Waugh’s new ‘Preface’ notes that Simpson lived during ‘a brief truce in an unending war’ and that ‘the martyrdom of Father Pro in Mexico re-enacted Campion’s in faithful detail’.¹⁷

[Fr Miguel Pro SJ](#) (1891–1927) returned to his native Mexico in order to regain his health 23 days before a new law closed all churches and banned all religious worship. Like Campion, he carried out his priestly ministry ‘disguised in dark lounge suit’ and ‘bright cardigan’ for sixteen months before being arrested.¹⁸ After a manifestly unjust trial, he was sentenced to death by firing squad. President Plutarco Calles, hoping for a publicity coup, invited the press to photograph the event; the joyful Jesuit, like Campion, transformed his execution into a religious enactment of the essence of Christian martyrdom. He refused a blindfold, insisted on first kneeling to pray, and died standing with his arms outstretched, shouting ‘*Viva Cristo Rey!*’ so conforming himself to Christ, even unto death.¹⁹

Waugh’s reference to Miguel Pro, therefore, is no minor change. The citation for the Hawthornden Prize in 1936, brushing aside the historical polemic, focused instead on Waugh’s imaginative insights into the heart and mind of Campion the martyr:

Mr. Waugh’s subject was one from which controversy was inseparable, and to disagree sometimes with his interpretation of history and with his opinion of Elizabethan policy was to be the more impressed by the moderation and insight with which he had set forth his own point of view. To know what a man lived for was to know very little of him; to know what he would die for was to know much more; but to understand what, in his secret life, he prayed for, and why, and to whom, was to know as much as we might guess on earth. It was because Mr. Waugh revealed this aspect of Campion’s life that his book was of permanent value.²⁰

In the intervening years of war and growing totalitarian oppression across Eastern Europe, Waugh himself became less concerned with the oppression of Elizabeth’s rule, and more interested in keeping the flame of faith burning in the face of totalitarian monsters, like Stalin and Tito. Waugh’s ‘Preface’, first written in 1946, echoes both the end of *Brideshead* (where ‘the small red flame’ burns before the tabernacle) and the first chapter of John’s Gospel (which in Waugh’s day used to end every celebration of Mass) to portray an ancient faith still burning in a world almost enveloped by the darkness.

We are nearer Campion than when I wrote of him. We have seen the Church drawn underground in country after country. In fragments and whispers we get news of other saints in the prison camps of Eastern and South-eastern Europe, of cruelty and degradation more savage than anything in Tudor England, of the same, pure light shining in darkness, uncomprehended. The hunted, trapped, murdered priest is our contemporary and Campion’s voice sounds to us across the centuries as though he were walking at our elbow.²¹

Many people were deeply affected by this, ‘simple, but perfectly true story of heroism and holiness’ in those Cold War years.²² Soon after it was first published, Waugh had written to Katharine Asquith to say, ‘I am very excited about the reception of *Campion*. Just as a spinster with a first novel.’²³ Ten years later, Elizabeth Longford wrote to Waugh to thank him, and to say that she, ‘felt quite different after reading it, though I could never explain how profoundly moved I was’.²⁴ 25 years later, there were many who had been profoundly moved by it: D’Arcy wrote to Waugh in 1960 to quote from a Jesuit Provincial Newsletter:

A photographer 15 years ago got interested in this life of Campion, became a Catholic, gave this book to his wife who then became a Catholic also, who passed the book on to her brother who read it, also became a Catholic, came to Osterley & is now a Benedictine at Pluscarden ... She is still trying to spread this book.²⁵

If the book transformed the lives of others, it had the greatest effect on Waugh himself. An invisible thread connects it to *Brideshead Revisited*, *Helena*, *Ronald Knox*, *Men at Arms*, *Officers and Gentlemen* and *Unconditional Surrender*, also published in 1961, the year Waugh made his final change to the end of the ‘Preface’. Now Campion is heard as if ‘he were walking at our elbow’.²⁶ The change from ‘at our side’ suggests that Waugh now felt him as a more insistent presence, not just a heavenly companion, but even more an inspiration for action.

Professor Gerard Kilroy is the author of Edmund Campion: A Scholarly Life (Ashgate, 2015) and co-editor of a new edition of Edmund Campion, to be published by Oxford University Press as one of the approximately 45 volumes of the Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh.

¹ Evelyn Waugh, *Edmund Campion*, 3rd edn (London: Longmans, 1961), p. vii.

² H. J. A. Sire, *Father Martin D'Arcy: Philosopher of Christian Love* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1997), p. 66.

³ Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years 1903–1939* (London: Dent, 1986), p. 336–337; Selina Hastings, *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), pp. 282–283; Mark Amory, ed., *Letters of Evelyn Waugh* (New Haven and New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1980), pp. 72–78. Twelve Catholic intellectuals, rallied by Tom Burns, sprang to his defence: M. C. D'Arcy SJ, T. F. Burns, Bede Jarrett OP., D. B. Wyndham Lewis, Lord William Clonmore, C. C. Martindale SJ, Letitia Fairfield, R. H. J. Stuart SJ, Eric Gill, Algar Howard, Christopher Hollis, Douglas Woodruff.

⁴ KA to EW, BL Add. MS 81047, fol. 12r.

⁵ KA to EW, 1 January 1945, BL Add. MS 81047, fol. 14r.

⁶ Stannard, *Early Years*, p. 351; Hastings, *Evelyn Waugh*, pp. 289–290; Philip Eade, *Evelyn Waugh: A Life Revisited* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2016), p. 193.

⁷ EW to Mary Lygon [10 January 1935].

⁸ Eade, *A Life Revisited*, pp. 181–83; Hastings, *Evelyn Waugh*, p. 588; the blame for the 'reprehensible delays' (as the Rota called them) lay with Cardinal Bourne's assistant, Bishop Myers.

⁹ *Edmund Campion*, 3rd edn, p. 199.

¹⁰ From 7 October to 25 November 1934 there are nine letters to A.D. Peters or W. N. Roughead from the Easton Court Hotel, see Davis, Robert Murray, *A Catalogue of the Evelyn Waugh Collection at the Humanities Research Center The University of Texas at Austin* (New York: Whitston Publishing Company, 1981), E248 to E258, with just two from London. He appears to have spent much of January at Mells: Stannard, *Early Years*, p. 394, and letter to Peters, from Mells, 16 January 1935, Davis, Catalogue, E262.

¹¹ BL Add. MS 81057, fol. 142r, 6 July 1936. The whole text reads: "32 ROMA 465 11.35 = DEVIE VIA FILO = WAUGH DUCHESS LONDON = DECISION FAVOURABLE = GODFREY =".

¹² EW to W.N. Roughead, 22 November 1945, Davis E452.

¹³ Compare Evelyn Waugh, *Edmund Campion* (London: Longmans, 1935), pp. ix–x, with *Edmund Campion* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1946), pp. 7–8.

¹⁴ Graham Greene, *The Lawless Roads* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939, repr. 1976), p. 75; see Michael Brennan, 'Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and Mexico', in *Resurgence*, 15.1 (2002), 7–23, who shows, in a superb article, that the influence was mutual, and that Mexico transformed the faith of both men.

¹⁵ John Gerard, *Autobiography of an Elizabethan*, trans. Philip Caraman, S.J. (London: Longmans, 1951).

¹⁶ Brennan, 'Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and Mexico', pp. 12–14.

¹⁷ *Edmund Campion* 3rd edn (1961), p. viii.

¹⁸ Greene, *Lawless Roads*, p. 19.

¹⁹ Bert Ghezzi, 'Blessed Miguel Pro, SJ (1891 – 1927)', www.IgnatianSpirituality.com. For the theology of martyrdom, see Karl Rahner, 'Le Martyre', in *Ecrits Théologiques*, vol 3, trans. Gaëtan Daoust, SJ (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963), pp. 171–203.

²⁰ *The Times*, 25 June 1936, 11.

²¹ This is the final version, slightly improved, in the third edition.

²² *Edmund Campion* 3rd edn (1961), p. viii.

²³ EW to Katherine Asquith, c. 5 November 1935, Mells Manor MS 403. Katherine Asquith's own response appears to have been lost, along with many other letters from this period.

²⁴ Elizabeth Longford to EW, 24 Apr 1946.

²⁵ D'Arcy to EW, 6 July 1960, BL Add. MS 81052, fol. 130r.

²⁶ *Edmund Campion* 3rd edn (1961), p. viii; cf. *Edmund Campion* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1946), p. 8.