

## A Miscalculated Demolition: Evelyn Waugh's 1942 Wartime Letter to His Wife

### Epigraph

“There can be no return to the *Syllabus* [*i.e.*, Pope Pius IX's 8 December 1864 *Syllabus Errorum*], which may have marked the first stage in the confrontation with liberalism and a newly conceived [sic] Marxism but cannot be the last stage. In the long run, neither embrace nor ghetto [sic] can **solve** for Christians **the** problem of the modern world. **The fact [sic] is**, as Hans Urs von Balthasar pointed out as early as 1952, that **the “demolition of the bastions” is a long-overdue task.**” (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987, first in German in 1982), p. 391—my emphasis added)

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Some Modern Catholic (or Neo-Modernist) Churchmen have advocated—at least since Pope Pius XII's 1950 Encyclical, *Humani Generis*, or soon thereafter — “**the demolition of the bastions**,” seeming to refer to a timely removing of the barriers between the Catholic Church and the Modern World—outside (as well as inside) the gates and windows of the Church, as it were. We need not mention their names, nor here discuss their specific and nuanced religious ideologies of “convergence.” For, we now only want to consider how, symbolically and actually in 1942, a British Commando troop of Sappers used its own demolitions rather shortsightedly, and quite destructively. As we shall see, this 1942 vignette also involves the partial shattering of a Scottish Lord's own historic Castle and all of its windows. Commando Evelyn Waugh was then present to see some of the immediate consequences of all these rash miscalculations. He was attentively present at least as an observer and associate of “Number 3 Commando” along with its then-current Commanding Officer, Colonel John Durnford-Slater.<sup>1</sup>

After having been himself a combatant officer in West and North Africa and the Isle of Crete in 1940-1941 with Number 8 Commando, Evelyn Waugh had gradually arrived back in Scotland by May

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<sup>1</sup> Colonel Durnford-Slater (1909-1972) was a very courageous officer and one of the early founders of the British Commandos: and he was, in 1953, some ten years later, to publish his own highly esteemed book, entitled *Commando: Memoirs of a Fighting Commando in World War Two*, by Brigadier John Durnford-Slater, D.S.O. & Bar. This book has been re-printed more than once, especially after his unexpected death in 1972.

of 1942. From Glasgow, Scotland — 33 miles from the Commando training center on the southeast seacoast of the Firth of Clyde, in Largs, Ayrshire — he wrote, on 31 May 1942, a short, but vivid, letter to his wife Laura that contains some memorable words and examples about demolitions and their hoped-for effects. That is to say, about the Number 3 Commando Sappers, and about their professedly useful and helpful explosives, as well as their unmistakable rashness and consequential presumption.

It was only in the mid-1990s that I first saw Waugh's preciously humorous letter to his wife Laura. A graduate student of mine at the Joint Military Intelligence College happily brought this letter, with a smile, to my attention one evening when we were dining together at the Officers Club on Bowling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C. This excellent graduate student — who later wrote a Master's Thesis on Antonio Gramsci, Indirect Strategy, and Psycho-Cultural Warfare — did not then know much about Commando Evelyn Waugh, nor had he yet read any of Waugh's essays or fictional and non-fictional books; but he knew that I had read Waugh quite extensively and intensively (to include his moving 1950 historical novel, *Helena*). In his own gifted style of expressively reading aloud before others, this fine strategic-minded graduate student then proceeded to regale me with his own animated reading of that Letter to Laura Waugh, and he articulated it with his own British accent.

Although I cannot attain to Tom's own gestures and varied tones of speech, I nonetheless now propose to introduce to some robust modern readers — especially the youth — Evelyn Waugh's deft and witty wartime letter to his wife, who was herself then protectively with their children in Somerset in southwest England, at Pixton Park, the Herbert family's country seat; the estate of Laura's own father and mother, the Herberts. World War II was far from being over in England in mid-1942.

Almost in its entirety, here is what Waugh wrote in mid-1942 (with my occasional, clarifying brackets and emphases and some minor editing, especially for an American and non-military audience):

Glasgow, Scotland, 31 May 1942

Darling,

It was a great joy to get a letter from you. I thought you had been swallowed up in some Pixton plague [down there at the country estate in Somerset]....

Miss Cowles leaves tonight [from Glasgow]. **Everyone except me will be sorry.** I have had [as if I were a liaison officer] to arrange all her movements and it has been a great deal of trouble. **She is a cheerful, unprincipled young woman. She wants to be made Colonel of the Commando,** so I have suggested Princess Margaret Rose

instead [the impish younger sister of Queen Elizabeth II]. Bob eats out of my hand at the moment [*i.e.*, Colonel Robert Laycock, later a Major General, was Waugh's enduring patron and also his prior Commando Commander in Crete and elsewhere, to whom Captain Waugh had been once again recently transferred].

So Number 3 Commando were very anxious to be **chums** with Lord Glasgow [1874-1963, the Earl of Glasgow]; so they offered to blow up an old tree stump for him, and he was very grateful and he said don't spoil the plantation of young trees near it because that is the apple of my eye; and they [No. 3 Commando] said no, of course not; **we [sappers] can blow a tree down so that it falls on a sixpence** and Lord Glasgow said goodness you are clever and he asked them all to luncheon **for the great explosion**. So [the Commanding Officer of Number 3 Commando,] **Colonel [John] Durnford-Slater, D.S.O.** [“Distinguished Service Order, second in rank to the Victoria Cross Medal, both of them being given for courage and further excellence in wartime, in actual combat, here it was specifically for valor in the Lofoten Islands off mainland Norway] said to his subaltern [lieutenant], **have you put enough explosive in the tree [?]**. Yes, sir, 75 pounds. Is that enough? Yes, sir; I worked it out by mathematics; it is exactly right. **Well better put a bit more**. Very good sir.

And when Colonel D. Slater D.S.O. [the author of the highly regarded 1953 book, *Commando*] had had his port [wine] he sent for his subaltern and said subaltern **better put a bit more explosive in that tree**. I don't want to disappoint Lord Glasgow. Very good sir.

Then they all went out to see the explosion and Colonel D.S., D.S.O. said you will see that tree fall flat at just the angle where it will hurt no young trees, **and Lord Glasgow said goodness you are clever**.

So, soon they lit the fuse and waited for the explosion **and presently the tree, instead of falling quietly sideways, rose 50 feet in the air taking with it ½ [one-half] an acre of soil and the whole of the young plantation**.

And the subaltern said **Sir I made a mistake**; it should have been 7.5 pounds not 75 [pounds].

**Lord Glasgow was so upset he walked in dead silence back to his castle; and when they came to the turn of the drive, in sight of his castle, what should they find out but that every pane of glass in the building was broken**.

So, Lord Glasgow gave a little cry **and ran to hide his emotion** in the lavatory [private bathroom], **and there**, when he pulled the plug [flush], **the entire ceiling, loosened by the explosion, fell on his head**.

[Darling Laura,] **This is quite true.**<sup>2</sup>

Those who elsewhere also expect to have a controlled demolition—to include a managed

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<sup>2</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh* (Edited by Mark Amory) (New Haven and New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1980), pages 160-161—my emphasis added.

revolutionary demolition of Sacred Tradition or Irreformable Sacred Doctrine in the Catholic Church—all too easily are self-sabotaging, and lose control and do more damage than they had purportedly intended in the first place. Such it still is, also today, in the Catholic Church in 2018.

**Even when** bloodshed has been avoided, **it is often at the cost of honor**. (So wrote Evelyn Waugh to Laura from West Africa in 1940, when he was not far from Dakar, Senegal; and he was writing soon after their failed British Marines-and-Commando expedition to seize Dakar from Vichy control, supposedly in order to help the “Free French” of General Charles de Gaulle in “Operation Menace.”)

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