Library Signpost — **By Rev. Benedict Ehmann**

Here is a Superb and Profound Novel

Brideshead Revisited, by Evelyn Waugh. (Little, Brown: $2.50).

For fifteen years or so, Mr. Waugh has been amusing a small and devoted coterie of readers with little novels of deadly satire on the aimless paganism of the idle rich and the social climbers of the 1920's and 30's in England. There is nothing like them in the writing of our time, light, sharp rapier-thrusts glancing deftly and brightly against the follies and fol-de-rol of post-war Vanity Fair.

Mr. Waugh was so screamingly funny that they could hardly believe it when their clever harlequin became a Catholic. That was back in 1930. There was one note they missed in the carnival antics of those early books, the echo of the Ash Wednesday bell. You had to be in tune with it yourself to hear it, but there surely was its faint and faraway warning amid all the strident jamboree for anyone who had ears to hear. It sounded clearest in A Handful of Dust, where there was less farce and slapstick and more of dark irony, the very title being borrowed from T. S. Eliot's poem "Ash Wednesday."

Here was a brilliant tour de force, like a fierce and biting morality play, wherein the "fear, in a handful of dust" is never felt by the characters nor indicated by the author, but is most sharply brought home to the observant reader. It is safe to assert that never has the emptiness of modern secular life with its blind disregard of the bottom falling out of everything been so appallingly described in contemporary fiction.

A Handful of Dust was Mr. Waugh's most brilliant and powerful novel to date. But now, with the publication of Brideshead Revisited, the earlier novel shows up as an apprentice's accomplishment. For Brideshead Revisited is so much more splendid a work of art, so much more substantial a human document, mature, compassionate, and illuminated by Christian faith, that it reveals a new Mr. Waugh, who can now be called one of the major novelists of our century, and, with this book, let us say one of the major Catholic novelists of our time.

A short review cannot possibly hope to convey the subtle artistry and music of Brideshead Revisited. Some of it is equal to the best prose I have ever read in our language. If a musical correlative will help, the style is akin to Mozart, almost flawless, hauntingly melodious, and calling up deep and poignant impressions. The characters, too, are fascinating, not painted in bold, broad strokes, but subtly, with countless shades and nuances of color, full of mystery.

The structure of the book is marvelously contrived and intricate, like a Swiss watch, yet not less simple and evident than that delicate instrument. No character is described once and for all, baldly, at his introduction. The portraits grow throughout the book, in things that are told by others, or done by the persons themselves; and there is the most remarkable dovetailing of scene and incident to give a simple coherence to the complex narrative.

The story is told in the form of memoirs, the narrator being a captain in the English Army in the present war. He is now aproaching forty. His division of the army is being billeted, as the story opens, to new and unknown quarters, which on arrival are recognized by him to be the Brideshead estate, where, in earlier years, he had often been a welcome and intimate guest, and later an occupant as the result of an illicit liaison with one of the Brideshead daughters. The body of the novel unfolds his relations with the fascinating Marchmain family who dwelt at Brideshead. Lady Marchmain is charming and imperious, a devout Catholic, yet not saintly enough to keep her from driving her husband and one of her children from her. Lord Marchmain, a sort of Byronic worldling who became a convert at his wedding, eventually left his wife after serving in the first World War and took up an abode with a mistress in Venice. There are four children: Brideshead, square-hewn, somber and pompous; Sebastian, handsome, wayward, capricious, hating his family, becoming an alcoholic; Julia, like Sebastian, beautiful and capricious, but not hating her family; and Cordelia, the youngest, still at school, naive and forthright, the least complex of the family.

There are many concurrents to the story, but the deep undertow seems to be the decadence of a great Catholic family. Yet the author is not a depressing reporter: he is an artist and a man of faith and compassion. There are few pages more powerful in modern fiction than those which here describe the deathbed days of Lord Marchmain with their ultimate sign of grace, or the final renunciation which Julia makes of her adulterous friendship, or the bedraggled life of Sebastian being purified and channeled into holiness by service as a handyman in a Franciscan monastery in Morocco. The story of the lapse and loss of the ancestral Faith is not pleasant, and all the while the sanctuary lamp is burning before the Real Presence in Brideshead chapel.

At Lady Marchmain's death, the praying stops, and the Blessed Sacrament is removed by order of the Bishop. The faith looks dead, like an extinct volcano. But the dormant fire flares up before long, and the prodigal children feel God's twitch upon the thread that holds them to their Catholic past. It was this, more than anything else, which convinced Captain Ryder, the agnostic narrator of the story, of the reality of God and of the working of His grace within the Church: the book comes to a close with this revelation, in a final paragraph of exquisite beauty.

This "fierce little human tragedy," as Captain Ryder calls it, will not be everyman's meat, might even be some people's poison. It is an adult book. It is explicit, but not pornographic, about sex. There is one thoroughly unpleasant minor character, organic to the structure of the story, but allowed his say on two or three occasions too openly for the comfort of the sensitive reader. But I doubt whether anything in the book would pervert an adult or offer a difficult temptation. Its whole style and tone are serious and noble, a worthy instrument for one of the subtlest and profoundest studies yet written by any contemporary writer.

Book on Ozanam

Frederick Ozanam, the subject of the seventh book written by a Milwaukee newspaperman, A. P. Schimberg, associate editor of the "Catholic Herald Citizen." Ozanam was the founder of the St. Vincent de Paul Society which held its centennial observance in the fall of last year. The title of the book is "The Great Friend: Frederick Ozanam."

Children's Book Club Announces Selections

New York — (NC) — The newly formed Catholic Children's Book Club, affiliated with the America Press here, has announced choice of "The Mule Skinners," by Myra Reed Richardson, as its January selection for Group A (ages 9 to 11), and "Larger Than the Sky," by Covelle Newcomb, for Groups B and C (ages 12 to 16).

In February, it was stated, the club will add a fourth group, including boys and girls from 6 to 8 years old.

Notre Dame Registrar To Head New College

Notre Dame, Ind. — (NC) — The Rev. James W. Connerton, [illegible] registrar of the University of Notre Dame, has been appointed administrator of King's College, a new school being established at Wilkes-Barre, Pa., by the Congregation of the Holy Cross.

Father Connerton will supervise the organization of the new college and will become its president when the organization work is completed. The Rev. Louis J. [illegible], C.S.C., who has been engaged in parish work in New Orleans, will be the new Notre Dame registrar.

The Literary Cavalcade

'Brideshead Revisited'

By John O'Connor

Evelyn Waugh has frequently been hailed as one of the most talented of England's younger writers. In Brideshead Revisited he sustains any claim to that accolade and to any other praise that may come along. (Little, Brown.)

Captain Charles Ryder — an agnostic — tells the story in the first person. Billeted with his troops in a misty valley one night, he awakens to find that they are on the estate where he spent most of his Oxford days — and some idyllic and adulterous ones later. By a process of flashback sequences, he tells his story. . . .

The false facade of faith which Lady Marchmain erected was ignored by her husband, who went off to live in Venice but returned to die at home in a scene that only a Waugh could handle correctly. Lady Julia, who gives up her faith, marries a "climber" she doesn't love. . . Young Cordelia, strong and active, and intelligently religious . . . Lord Brideshead, the elder son, a collector of matchboxes and obedient servant to his mother's iron will . . . the younger son who, after Oxford, takes to drink and after a number of episodes becomes a dipsomaniac remittance man in a Moroccan hovel before being taken in — an old man at 40 — by the Spanish Franciscans. . . . These are some of the characters Waugh portrays with a sharpness and a feeling for the right word and phrase that marks him above nearly all writers today.

It is seen through the eyes of an agnostic — a happy choice. And it is here that the final crisis comes. To reveal it would be to dilute the effect of the final pages.

In the epilogue Ryder seems to take on more and more of the marks of so many modern men. ". . . I never built anything; and I forfeited the right to watch my son grow . . . I'm homeless, childless, middle-aged, loveless. . . ." And the other characters: they are so well drawn, so well delineated — just look about you. You have met them all in one guise or another. Only the author has seen them better than we have.

It is in the short epilogue that there is found a faint but inspiring glimmer of hope. Ryder, after visiting the house where only the old nurse is left (Lady Julia is overseas) finally visits the little chapel which had been closed for years. To this writer, there is a subtle symbolism:

". . . I said a prayer, an ancient, newly learned form of words.

"The builders did not know the uses to which their work would descend; they made a new house with the stones of the old castle; year by year, generation by generation, they enriched and extended it; year by year the great timbers in the park grew to ripeness; until in the sudden frost came this . . . vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

"And yet . . .

". . . Something quite remote from anything the builders intended has come out of their work, and out of the fierce little human tragedy in which I played; something none of us thought about at the time: a small red lamp, re-lit before the beaten-copper doors of a tabernacle; the flame which the old knights saw from their tombs, which they saw put out; that flame burns again for other soldiers, far from home, farther in heart, than Acre or Jerusalem. It could not have been lit but for the builders and the tragedians, and there I found it this morning, burning anew among the old stones. . . ."

Waugh has written a great book. It is not for the squeamish nor the thrill-seeker. It is for those mature souls who are parched for good writing and a ruthless commentary on the people of our day . . . and a subtle note of hope besides.

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