

ARMENIAN JESUIT OF MANY PARTS

Posted on February 15, 2021 by Keghart



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Researched by Art Stepanian, Toronto, Ontario, 30 January 2021

Last month we published "[Armenians, a People of Rare Sensibility](#)" about British novelist Evelyn Waugh and his admiration of Armenians. He had met Armenians during his travels in Ethiopia in the late '20s and early '30s and written about them in "Remote People". This is part II of Waugh's relations with Armenians.

Evelyn Waugh met Jesuit Father Philip Caraman in the '30s. A snob with a sharp tongue, the writer didn't make friends easily. Caraman, charming and courteous, was a natural networker. But behind the charm there was a steely man when it came to religion. Despite their different temperaments, Waugh and Caraman became fast friends and remained until the writer's death in 1966. Waugh referred to Caraman as "dear, gentle Jesuit." Others called Caraman "the Traveling Jesuit" because of his frequent research trips regarding long-ago Jesuit missions. A historian, biographer, and novelist, he wrote more than a dozen books about Jesuits in far-flung locales (Ethiopia, Tibet, Australia, and Paraguay). One of his novels about the Jesuits in South America was made into a movie ("The Mission") starring Robert De Niro and Jeremy Irons. He was a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and consultant to the Vatican re the canonization qualification of nominees.

Father Caraman, born in London in 1911, was the son of Armenian parents who had fled Izmir because of the Hamidian massacres. His father Rene was a merchant. The family was devoutly Catholic. Philip's brother was also a Jesuit while two of his seven sisters were nuns. Father Caraman spoke eight languages, including Armenian.

In 1948 Caraman was appointed editor of "This Month" Jesuit monthly which was facing possible closure. He quickly improved the magazine's looks and content, partly with the help of writer friends Waugh, Graham Greene, John Betjeman, Muriel Spark, Edith Sitwell, and Nancy Mitford who were the crème de la crème of mid-20th century English literature. Caraman's large circle of friends was jokingly nicknamed "Caramanserai." The Armenian Jesuit became spiritual adviser to several of his writer friends and helped usher them into the Catholic Church. He was also the spiritual adviser of actor Sir Alec Guinness whom he received into the Catholic Church.

In 1950, when Waugh was writing "Helene", Caraman provided the historical background for the book. In 1954, Waugh asked Caraman to exorcise him. Caraman told his friend that before considering exorcism, Waugh should see a doctor. The psychiatrist learned Waugh had been drinking heavily and taking sleeping pills. As a result of the sessions with the doctor, Waugh wrote one of his best books "The Ordeal of Gilbert Penfold."

When Waugh had a heart attack in 1966 Caraman rushed to his friend's home. At the writer's requiem mass in Westminster Cathedral he said: "Christ commands to trade with our talents. This Evelyn Waugh did. He sought perfection in his craft and came nearer to achieving it than perhaps any man of his time."

Father Caraman died in 1998. His gravestone reads: "You who have absolved Mary, and have heard the thief's prayer, Have also given me hope."

There are no comments yet.