ARMENIANS: A RACE OF RARE SENSIBILITY

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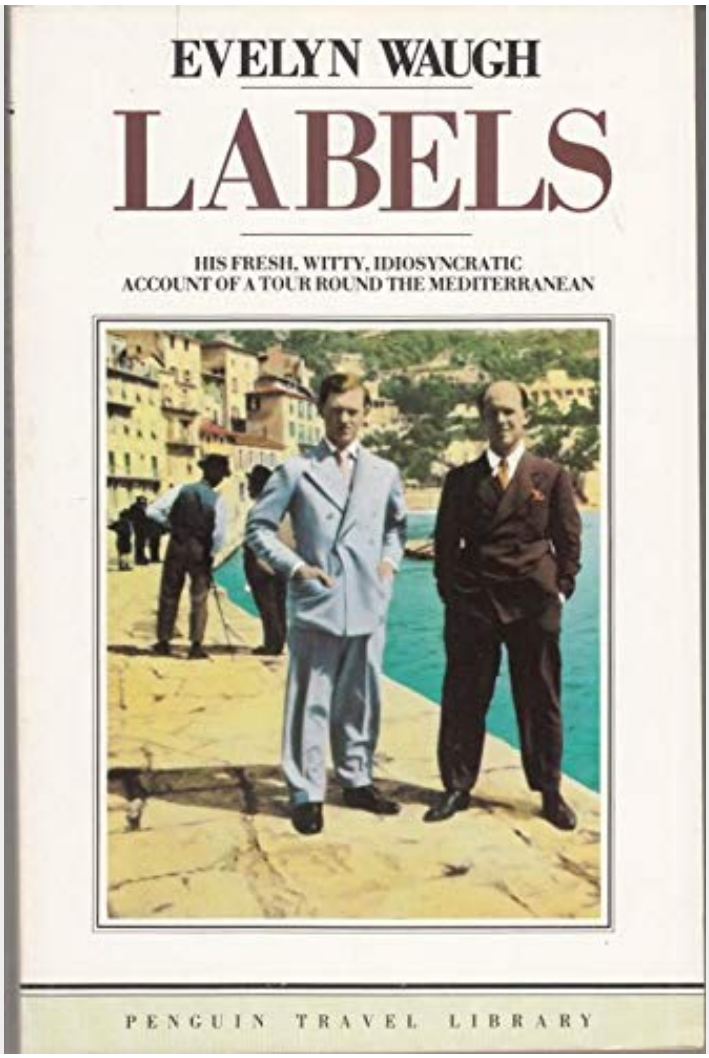

Category: Opinions



Researched by Art Stepanian, Toronto, Ontario, 11 December 2020

Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966) was one of the most popular English novelists of the 20th century. In the Twenties and Thirties, Waugh traveled extensively and wrote about his trips. His first travel book ("Lebels") was about his Mediterranean cruise and the second ("Remote People") about his trip to Ethiopia (1930) to report on the coronation of the emperor.

In Ethiopia Waugh met two Armenians. A hard-to-please man with a sharp tongue, Waugh was impressed by the two men (his driver and a small hotel owner). His take of the two Armenians (the driver is not identified but the hotel owner's name was "Bergebedigian"] was remarkably complimentary. During his Mediterranean cruise in 1929, Waugh spent several days in Istanbul. The city didn't impress him. Below are extracts from his report on Istanbul and his memories of the two Armenians in Ethiopia.

"LABELS" (Chapter 5)

I spent the next day with a party of fellow passengers visiting the more obvious sights of the town —all of them far too famous to require description. It was an interesting example of the new regime in Turkey, that the dragoman assigned to us by the Natta tourist agency was a woman, a very plan, plump, self-possessed little person, who instructed us in a manner of maddening gentleness and forbearance, as though she were conducting a school treat of young children who had to be amused but kept well in hand…We saw Agia Sophia, a majestic shell full of vile Turkish fripperies, whose whole architectural rectitude has been fatally disturbed by the reorientation of the *mihrab.* We saw the famous blue mosque, where the effect of the fine blue-green tiles of the walls, mostly, I think, of Persian workmanship, is hurt by the crude Reckitt's blue of the painting and the characterless vulgarity of the patterns inside the dome. In Cairo I have noted the pride and superiority which a Western mind must feel when confronted with Arabic art; this feeling is intensified and broadened a hundred times in relation to everything Turkish. They seem to have been unable to touch any existing work or to imitate any existing movement without degrading it.

After this, with only about two hours to spare, we went to Serai, the palace of the Sultans, now converted into a public museum; the attendants are mostly the survivors of the royal eunuchs. One was a dwarf; he had a funny little shriveled up sexless face, and a big black overcoat which brushed the ground and came very near tripping him up once or twice. None of them were as big and fat as I had imagined.

…the Serai is simply a glorified nomad encampment. It is exposed to cold winds from the Steppes, and snow is not uncommon. Yet, in five centuries of Turkish occupation, it seems never to have occurred to the sultans, with vast wealth and unlimited labor at their disposal, to provide any kind of covered corridor between the various rooms of their chief residence. Their highest aspirations towards physical luxury were confined to sprawling among gaudy silk cushions and munching

sweetmeats while the icy wind whistled through the lattice-work over their heads. No wonder they took to drink.

The astonishing thing is the amount of treasure that has survived the years of imperial bankruptcy. There are huge uncut emeralds and diamonds, great shapeless drop full of flaws, like half-sucked sweets; there is a gold throne set with cabochons of precious stone; throne of inlaid mother-o'-pearl and tortoiseshell; there is the right hand and the skull of St. John the Baptist.

The chief subject of conversation on board that evening was an accident which had occurred in the harbor. The ferry steamer had run on to the rocks in the morning mist. The ship had been crowded with laborers going across to their work. At the first impact, the Captain and his chief officer leaped into the only boat and made off. Later in the day the Captain resigned his command, on the grounds that this was the third time it had happened in eighteen months and his nerves were not what they had been."

"REMOTE PEOPLE" (1930)

This monastery has for four centuries been the centre of Abyssinian spiritual life. The expedition consisted simply of ourselves, a bullet-headed Armenian chauffeur, and a small native boy, who attached himself to us without invitation. The car did things I should have thought no car could possibly do.

Poised among the trees, two-thirds of the way down on a semi-circular shelf of land, we could discern the roofs of Debra Lebanos. A cleft path led down the face of the cliff and it was for this that we were clearly making. It looked hopelessly unsafe, but our Armenian plunged down with fine intrepidity.

The Armenian strode on in front of us, a gallant little figure with his cropped head and rotund, gaitered legs; the boy staggered behind, carrying overcoats, blankets, provisions, and a good half-dozen of the empty bottles. Suddenly the Armenian stopped and, with his finger on his lips, drew our attention to the rocks just below us. Twenty or thirty baboons of both sexes and all ages were huddled in the shade.

A mob of ragged boys, mostly infected with skin diseases, surrounded us and were repelled by the Armenian (These, we learned later, were the deacons.) Soon a fine-looking, bearded monk, carrying a yellow sunshade, came out of the shadow of a tree and advanced to greet us. We gave him our letter of introduction from the Abuna, and after he had scrutinized both sides of the envelope, with some closeness, he agreed, through our Armenian, who from now on acted as interpreter, to fetch the head of the monastery,

As we turned back, our Armenian and a monk met us with a message from the abuna—should they

kill a goat, a sheep, or a calf for dinner? We explained that we had full provision for our food. All we required was shelter for the night and water to wash in. The Armenian explained that it was usual to accept something. The question of our accommodation was then discussed. There was a hut or a tent. The Armenian warned us that if we slept in the hut we should certainly contract some repulsive disease, and if in the tent, we might be killed by hyenas. He had already made up his mind, he said, to sleep in the car.

In five minutes, when I had opened a tinned grouse and a bottle of lager and the professor was happily mumbling a handful of ripe olives, the Armenian returned, With a comprehensive wink, he picked up the jug of native beer, threw back his head, and, without pausing to breathe, drank a quart or two. He then spread out two rounds of bread, emptied a large quantity of honey into each of them, wrapped them together, and put them in his pocket, "Moi, je suis manger comme abyssin,' he remarked cheerfully, winked at the grouse, wished us good night, and left us.

We had all walked round and round for half an hour in widening circles, searching the completely blank earth with electric torches, We came back defeated. We drove on and ran straight into a caravan bivouacked round a camp-fire. Our arrival caused great consternation in the camp. Men and women ran out of the tents or sprang out of the ground from huddled heaps of blankets; the animals sprang up and strained at their tethers or tumbled about with hobbled legs. Rifles were leveled at us, The Armenian strode into their midst, however, and after distributing minute sums of money as a sign of good will, elicited directions.

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"There are two inns in Harar , boasting the names of Lion d'Or and Bellevue; both universally condemned as unsuitable for European habitation. Any doubt I might have had about which to patronize was resolved, as soon as we turned into the main street, by a stout little man in black skull-cap, who threw himself at my bridle and led me to the Lion d'Or. During my brief visit I became attached to this man. He was Armenian of rare character, named Bergebedigian; he spoke a queer kind of French with remarkable volubility, and I found great delight in all his opinions; I do not think I have ever met a more tolerant man; he had no prejudice or scruples of race, creed, or morals of any kind whatever; there were in his mind none of these opaque patches of principle; it was a single translucent pool of placid doubt; whatever splashes of precept had disturbed its surface from time to time had left no ripple; reflex ions flitted to and fro and left it unchanged.

Unfortunately his hotel was less admirable. Most of his business was done in the bar, where he sold great quantities of colorless and highly inflammatory spirit distilled by a fellow countryman of his and labeled, capriciously, "Very Olde Scotts Whiskey', 'Fine Champayne', or 'Hollands Gin' as the taste of his clients dictated. Next to the bar was a little dining room where two or three regular customers (also fellow countrymen) took their greasy and pungent meals.

We went through the bazaar, Mr. Bergebedigian disparaging all the goods in the friendliest way

possible, and I bought some silver bangles which he obtained for me at a negligible fraction of their original price. We went into several private houses, where Mr. Bergebedigian examined and exhibited everything, pulling clothes out of the chests, bringing down bags of spice from the shelves, opening the oven and tasting the food, pinching the girls, and giving half-piaster pieces to the children. We went into a workshop where three or four girls of dazzling beauty were at work making tables and trays of fine, brilliantly patterned basketwork. Everywhere he went he seemed to be welcome; everywhere he not only adapted, but completely transformed, his manners to the environment. When I came to consider the question I was surprised to realize that the two most accomplished men I met during this six months I was abroad, the chauffeur who took us to Debra Lebanos and Mr. Bergebedigian, should both have been Armenians. A race of rare competence and the most delicate sensibility. They seem to be the only genuine 'men of the world'. I suppose everyone at times likes to picture himself as such a person. Sometimes, when I find that elusive ideal looming too attractively, when I envy among friends this one's adaptability to diverse company, this one's cosmopolitan experience, this one's impenetrable armor against sentimentality and humbug, that one's freedom from conventional prejudices, this one's astute ordering of his finances and nicely calculated hospitality, and realize that, whatever happens to me and however I deplore it, I shall never in actual fact become a 'an of the world' of the kind I read about in novels—then I comfort myself a little by thinking that, perhaps, if I were an Armenian I should find things easier.

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The warmth of my admiration for Armenians clearly shocks him, but he is too polite to say so. Instead, he tells me of splendid tortures inflicted on them by his relations.

There are no comments yet.