A Conversation with Martin Stannard and Barbara Cooke

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Abstract *Martin Stannard is Professor of Modern English Literature at the University of Leicester. He read for his first degree in English at Warwick (1967-70), before taking an MA at Sussex University, and a DPhil at Oxford. Professor Stannard's two-volume literary biography of Evelyn Waugh (**1986, 1992**), and his biography of Muriel Spark (**2009**) are essential reading for Waugh and Spark scholars, and are each studies in the value of historical contextualisation for appreciating the literary oeuvre of a writer. Stannard's 1995 Norton Critical Edition of Ford Madox Ford's modernist novel,* The Good Soldier*, similarly brings context to bear through his rigorous textual editing, annotation and critical apparatus. Stannard is currently the Principal Investigator for the Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh project, which is supported by a grant of £822,000 from the AHRC, and which will see Oxford University Press publish 43 scholarly edition volumes of Waugh – the first of which appears next year. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of Waugh's death.*

Dr Barbara Cooke also teaches at the School of English at the University of Leicester. She received a BA and MA from Warwick (2003-6; 2006-7), and a PhD in Creative and Critical writing from the University of East Anglia for her interdisciplinary thesis Oil Men: the Twinned Lives of Arnold Wilson and Morris Young*. Dr Cooke is Research Associate for the Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh, providing a vital link between the project's 23 editors, of which she is one, editing Waugh's autobiography* A Little Learning *(**1964**). She is also currently preparing* Evelyn Waugh's Oxford *for Bodleian Publications, to accompany an exhibition happening in the city next year.*

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When I met Professor Stannard and Dr Cooke in Leicester, I wanted to find out more about the *Complete Works* project, which has been forecast to revolutionise Waugh studies, and twentieth-century literary studies more widely. I asked them about the project's scope and outcomes, and the challenges attached to producing the largest-scale edition of any British novelist. I asked Stannard, also, about his philosophy on the writing of literary biography, as it seems that his biographies exemplify the balance between creatively shaping the narrative of the life, and bringing the life to speak for the literary works; as Stannard put it, 'you read the life as the context of the work'. There is a curious irony, I felt, in bringing shrewd historicisation to an impressionistic text such as *The Good Soldier*: how should an editor deal with the deliberate evasions of an unreliable narrator, and separate this from the periodic carelessness of an author like Ford? Additionally, Stannard drew on his fifty years in the field of English Literary Studies to describe some key changes and continuities, and the impact these have specifically on early career researchers, and on undergraduate teaching, today.

Interview

AW: I want to ask you first, Martin, about your experience as an undergraduate at Warwick University. You were among its first cohorts of students; what was the English Department like at the time?

MS: They were volatile times and very exciting – I really enjoyed my time there. When I went up in 1967 there were 40 students in my year, and there were two years ahead of us - it was the first time that English at Warwick had a full three years of students. We had a curriculum which I think is largely unchanged now, and was invented by Professor George Hunter. It depended very heavily on working with literatures in other languages. You had to have an A level in a foreign language or learn one from scratch. There were very interesting courses like The European Novel and European Drama, which I studied with Germaine Greer. None of us had any idea that Greer was then writing *The Female Eunuch*, which was published in 1970: the year I graduated. She was mainly known in those days as a brilliant Renaissance scholar. There were some intriguing staff in Warwick at the time: Ken Gransden, who was a friend of E.M. Forster's, was one of the four founding members of the English Department. I was taught by Anthony Easthope, before he went on to become quite a significant figure in literary theory, by a brilliant German scholar, R.H. Lass, and by Bernard Bergonzi, who later became a friend.

George Hunter was the only person I've encountered in academic life whose lectures students from all years would go to. He was a man of phenomenal intellectual range.

AW: And what was it like to be a student in Warwick then?

MS: Of course at that time it was the peak of student unrest: 1968 fell right in the middle of my period there. Warwick was not very far from the UK forefront in student protests – invading the Registry and that kind of thing. I was sceptical about direct action, but sympathetic to it. They did discover something when they invaded the Registry: a UCCA form (as the UCAS form was known) on which the Vice Chancellor had apparently written 'Reject this man', because it had come with a letter from the student's headmaster saying something like 'I think you ought to know this person has been involved in political activism outside factory gates'. So that was a direct interference with the university's academic freedom, and we all got very angry about it. I can remember E.P. Thompson – the great Marxist historian who wrote *The Making of the English Working Class* (**1963**) – rallying the troops in the 'Airport Lounge', a massive space. He later wrote *Warwick University Limited* (**1971**), which might well have been the beginning of anxiety about universities turning themselves into businesses.

AW: What critics were influential to your development? Were there particular people that drew you towards literary biography for example?

MS: In the 1970s and for a decade afterwards literary biography was anathema, really. After Roland Barthes and the 'Death of the Author' (**1967**), it was thought to be a complete cul-de-sac. So I came to it independently. I have to say most literary criticism I find deadly boring. But there are certain literary critics who did hit me between the eyes. Humphrey House's *The Dickens World* (**1960**), is the beginning of good literary criticism which historicises the subject. Ian Watt on Joseph Conrad and Bernard Bergonzi are also very good critics of literature. What probably led me towards biography was the idea of historical context – it's the business of replacing the historical context which has interested me most. On the other hand, I think great literary criticism - which is a rarity - is an art, and a lot of the best stuff comes from writers themselves: Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell (in my field) – they're terrific literary critics. But somebody who really did stand out as a genius among academic literary critics was Frank Kermode, who I was very fortunate to get to know late in his life because he liked my biographies. He is an example of the artist; quite a lot of what he writes is I think dispersed in the sense you're not always quite sure of

what he's saying, but he says enough which expands your critical consciousness.

AW: Do you have any advice for early career researchers?

MS: For people who are completing a PhD, try to do so as near as possible within the time limit. How long you take to do a PhD can matter, when people are looking at applications. Sometimes interview panels look on this as a marker of how well or ill someone can meet deadlines. For postdoctoral researchers who have just got a job or are just starting, the simple answer is to write a book. If you've managed to get the job without writing a book that's quite good going these days, but you will need it fairly soon. They will have appointed you on the basis that you will have some major piece of work for the next Research Excellence Framework. You have to think these days – and I think it's rather sad – in terms of having a book once every five years – so you plan your career along those lines. Having said that, I was very fortunate at Leicester; I got held up with the Spark biography through long discussions with Muriel, and instead of telling me to ditch it, the University gave me as much time as I needed. So the other side of this – it's a bit contradictory – is that you have to do research that you believe in. And you're more likely to be remembered for stuff that's had a long maturity than stuff that you've just knocked out as part of an academic series. It's a very difficult balance between those two things. But right at the beginning, don't disperse your talents too thinly.

AW: How do you think things are different for people starting out in early career research today?

MS: Not much. It was always very difficult to get a job. I reckoned there'd be something like five or six jobs in any given year that I could apply for – so it was always tough. But there are more people out there now, and there are more efficient people out there now. It's less easy to be an eccentric, and it's less easy to take a long time over your PhD. In those days people might take eight or ten years to complete a PhD. When I first went to Oxford we were told if there was a single mistake in it then it could be referred, which is a terrifying prospect. Of course that wasn't true. But there was a sense that the PhD or DPhil had to be the last word on the subject. Now there's pressure on completion rates, and the PhD is basically seen as a research exercise that you complete in three years to demonstrate that you can do research. It's not meant to be the last word.

AW: In your first major work on Evelyn Waugh, The Critical Heritage (**1984**)*, you described how his public reputation as an ill-tempered reactionary was largely created by Waugh himself, in combination with the press. I wondered if your opinion changed as you wrote his biography?*

MS: In a sense, no. He was a great self-publicist right from the beginning. He knew, especially after his first wife had left him, that he was out there on his own. And if he wanted to live in that kind of a world, he would have to pay for it himself, through writing. He turned himself very quickly into the highest paid writer, probably, of his generation. By mid-1930, after the publication of *Vile Bodie*s, his income had risen to £2500 a year – a huge sum. And he did this through journalism, and through being very funny, and aggressive and subversive. He slowly built up this persona that he described in the (semi-autobiographical) *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957) as a combination of the eccentric don and the testy Colonel. I don't think he was really like that at all when he was young, but slowly the mask stuck to the skin and he became fossilised within it. I think a lot of his apparent rudeness was a kind of challenge to people to see if they could keep him in order. You meet people like this, with big, strong personalities, who test you out. If you rise to the challenge this person might like you, or else find you a bore.

AW: Did you find that Waugh was challenging you as a biographer – did you have to learn how to get on with him as a person?

MS: I always have been attracted to his wit and I'm a great fan of his writing. I don't think he would have liked me, and that's fine. I would see the biographer's job as being an advocate of the subject, but not an uncritical advocate. In the case of literary biography you are an advocate of the subject's writing. There have been many attacks, including famously by Germaine Greer who described biographers as 'pye-dogs', or writers such as George Eliot, saying that as soon as a writer is dead a biographer comes along and tips out all the contents of their desk. I think if your main interest is in the subject's personality you can't really justify it or separate if from voyeurism. You justify it when you read the life as the context of the work, so that ultimately what you have to say about the life helps people to understand the work better. That makes things difficult if you write the sort of book I do because you do want to keep the reader's mind constantly fixed on the work, rather than on the scandal.

*AW: Speaking of the art of writing biography, Virginia Woolf wrote about the tension between the necessity to give facts and the desire to creatively shape meaning ('the biographer's imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist's art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life') (**Bradshaw, 2008: 100**). Do you agree with Woolf, and can you describe your own approach in terms of the need to shape meaning?*

MS: Yes I do agree with her, because biography is an art. You start writing and realise that in many ways you're making it up. If you're a good researcher you end up with a vast array of data. Your study becomes like a police incident room, with photographs and interviews with witnesses. And then your job is to somehow make that into a story. It doesn't tell itself – you have to tell it your own way. In my case I started off with a scene in the nursery, where Alec is playing cricket and Evelyn is in his cot, and Alec is irritated that this baby is in the way – just to start all those deeply rooted stories and memories about Waugh's relationships with his brother and father and mother. With Spark I wanted to begin at the exact middle point of her life, where she's visiting her father while he's dying, to get some sense of how crucial that relationship was to her.

AW: Muriel Spark asked you to write her biography. Can you explain how that came about?

MS: It sounds rather immodest but this is true! I heard in advance that she was going to review the second volume of my Waugh biography for the *Daily Mail*, and I thought 'Oh God! She's really not going to like this', because she does figure in it as well. I knew Auberon Waugh [the late journalist and eldest son of Evelyn Waugh] didn't like the second volume, and Spark was supposedly a friend of his. But when the review came out it was very nice, so I wrote as I always do to somebody who gives a good review, to thank her. And then a couple of weeks later a card popped up in my pigeonhole here at the university, saying something like: 'Not a bit of it. I hope I have as good a biographer as you when my time comes around.' It was signed 'Muriel Sp'. I thought at first it must be one of my friends playing a joke. I thought it couldn't possibly be Spark because she was known to be a recluse. After a while I wrote back to her saying: 'if you're serious look no further'. And then she sent a long typed letter asking when was I over in Italy? So I went, with my partner Sharon and our two-and -a-half-year-old daughter. Spark was very nice, and it was a great success, our first meeting.

AW: You write in your preface to the biography that Spark told you to treat her as though she were dead. Was that possible? What were some of the disadvantages of working so closely with your subject?

MS: The short answer is: no, it was not possible! She was very witty about it. I reminded her of what she'd said, and she told me: 'I didn't mean that I would *react* as though I were dead!' It got quite difficult because she wanted to write the book herself. We got into a very long debate about what was factually true and what was not factually true. There were crazy situations where she'd say: 'You say this, where's the evidence for it?' And I'd say 'It's in the letter you've just cut.' It was difficult.

AW: What was Spark concerned about in the process?

MS: She seemed concerned by the idea that she might have ever caused anybody any trouble, and yet she was famous for it. You didn't need to go very far into the research before you found a whole chain of people who found her difficult. That's what made her who she was. She was tough, and I think that's extremely endearing. In many respects she was her own worst enemy. When she was taking on the gentlemen in Macmillan, for example, who weren't doing as she thought they should to promote her career, and she wrote a wonderfully savage letter – it was cruel but absolutely to the point – she wouldn't allow me to quote her. She was having a go at Alan Maclean, her editor, and insisting this be taken upstairs to his superiors. He could very easily have lost his job through this. He was a good man, but Muriel later thought he was her sworn enemy. He had given an interview in which he said that when he first knew Spark she was quite batty. She had had a nervous breakdown as a result of taking Dexedrine, and was suffering delusions, as she admitted. She suffered hallucinations whereby words would rewrite themselves into threatening messages on the page. Her first novel, *The Comforters* (**1957**), is a dramatisation of this scenario. The connection with Evelyn Waugh here is interesting, because when he reviewed the book he mentioned that he had been at work on a very similar novel at the time – the account of his own nervous breakdown, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* - and he said that she had done it rather better. He was writing this as probably the most senior living English novelist, about somebody who was totally unknown, other than as a minor poet and critic.

AW: You're currently involved in the enormous Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh *project. What kind of challenges do you face as the Principal Investigator?*

MS: They are many and various, but I think we foresaw most of them. I spent the best part of a year putting together the bid for the AHRC, which supports the project. I had to make it as faultless as possible, as there are so few of these grants. So with other people's help, we developed a pretty complicated and thoroughgoing system for the whole project. We established who our editors were going to be; I wrote a long, complex editorial principles document which became an editors' handbook. We secured the very generous grant from the AHRC, which has supplied the money for Barbara who is fabulous – a terrific link between editors and the project, apart from doing her own editing of Waugh's *A Little Learning* (**1964**). The main problems are simply logistical: we have editors all over the world. We had two things built into the project: a colloquium to start with, and an international conference over Easter 2015, both at Leicester, to bring all the editors together, and other people researching Waugh. Inevitably – and one could foresee this happening – the amount of time you apply for as relief from your job, doesn't come anywhere near the time you need for the job of running the project. And we have particularly these days to do a great raft of impact events, which I was a bit sceptical about at first but actually I think is a very good idea.

AW: The project's website describes its use of digital humanities technology. What does this entail?

BC: The project's website hosts a kind of virtual seminar space, where people can leave notes for each other, and editors can share their files. This is important because we're working with 23 editors and a number of different organisations around the world. Our project partners are the Brotherton Library in Leeds, the Humanities Research Center in Texas which has Waugh's library and most of his manuscripts, the University of Milan, the Evelyn Waugh estate, the Bodleian Library at Oxford, and Oxford University Press – and we're adding to these the Huntington Library in California which acquired a Waugh archive from the Rothschilds. The online forums mean, for example, that Waugh's personal writings are available to all project editors (his later unpublished letters won't come out for several years), and this can help them with the works that they are individually editing. We have also created a new Waugh bibliography for the project, digitising the 1986 original by Robert Murray Davis and Don Gallagher (also editors on the project) and adding to it. The Evelyn Waugh estate has given permission only for a printed

version of the new Waugh editions – but the technology we use means there would be an easy transition to put them online later.

AW: Are you anticipating any major revelations in the unpublished letters and diaries? Can you give Waugh enthusiasts and researchers a hint of what's to come?

BC: If you only have one or two volumes' worth of space for personal writings, as has happened with Waugh publications in the past, you necessarily have to be very selective and so it's hard to have a complete picture. Only 15% of Waugh's letters have been published, so there will be plenty of exciting new material. Alexander Waugh [Evelyn's grandson, and the General Editor of the project] was given a cache of Waugh's love letters by Teresa Cuthbertson, known as 'Baby' Jungman, to whom Waugh proposed after he divorced his first wife. Also, the diaries that Waugh kept while he was at Lancing School constitute the bulk of the first new volume of his personal writings, and this is going to be the most complete record of a boy's boarding school experience during and just after the First World War. Then, we are also hoping to discover resources relating to Waugh that we don't yet know about (we've already found quite a lot of 'new' material) – sometimes it's about discovering what is missing in order to fill in the gaps.

MS: Somebody came up to me when we were in Texas talking about Waugh's North American tours, and said that when he had visited Forest Lawn, the cemetery which is the basis for Whispering Glades in *The Loved One* (1948), he had found a publication by Forest Lawn – and he showed it to me – which Waugh must have seen. I've sent it to Adrian Poole who is editing *The Loved One*. Little things like that show it's a continuous business of discovery.

AW: You're editing Waugh's Vile Bodies (**1930**) *for the project, Martin, and you've written on it previously. What things have you noticed in your latest research into the text? Does your appreciation for it change over time?*

MS: My estimate of the text has hugely risen. In the first volume of my biography I took Waugh's own line, which was to say that it was a rather ill-constructed book. It was interesting and innovative – but the shape of it was a bit out of kilter; he wrote it very quickly and it was a miracle he wrote it at all because his wife left him in the middle of it. He had a near nervous breakdown and serious thoughts of suicide. But he survived it and became this very efficient writer – a writer of genius.

I'm glad to say I haven't found out much I didn't already know, even though I have been going through it with a fine toothcomb again. It's a good thing for scholars to go back over their work, though. You find that you make some incredible mistakes. For instance, I've always been describing the typed manuscript of *Vile Bodies* as a carbon copy. And I took one look at it in Texas – the second time I'd seen it in maybe 40 years – and saw it's not a carbon copy, it's a top copy, on very thin paper. But the general story I tell about how it fits into his biography, and what you might prove from the manuscript – which is now in the Brotherton Library in Leeds - I stick by.

AW: You've written extensively on Ford Madox Ford, and in 2011 your critical edition of The Good Soldier (**1915**) *was reissued by Norton. What were the difficulties of editing this particular novel?*

MS: Well, the second edition is no mean feat; it took about a year, because it needed updated critical material, and the whole bounds of the critical story had changed. The problem with Ford in this case was that the manuscript of *The Good Soldier* is a palimpsest consisting of typescript, and manuscript in four different hands – and none of them is Ford's own. He dictated the whole thing. There's also a huge problem at the centre of the text, which is a crucial date that recurs as a leitmotif – the date that Britain declared war on Germany, 4 August 1914. There's a lot of debate about whether Ford could have inserted this. My answer was that he'd written most of the novel before the outbreak of war. Like Graham Greene's *The End of The Affair* (**1951**), *The Good Soldier* is a modernist work in the sense that we are presented with a disrupted chronology; you always assume that because these works have an air of authority, you can reconstruct the temporal sequence of events. There's a piece at the back of my critical edition, by Vincent J. Cheng, called 'A Chronology of *The Good Soldier*', which demonstrates that Ford's chronology doesn't add up. But you get some critics, such as Roger Poole, who did not believe that Ford could make a mistake. Poole had such a high opinion of Ford as a craftsman that he had to assume that the text's mistakes were deliberate, and another marker to signal its postmodernity. For instance if Ford misspells the name of a painter – and Ford knew a hell of a lot about painting – the Roger Poole line says that he must have done this deliberately, in order to signal the central character Dowell's intellectual shortcomings. I have to say I think it's Ford's mistake; he had an astonishing mind but he wrote very quickly, and often wasn't particularly careful over detail. So I felt in the end I ought to alter misspellings and so on, because otherwise people wouldn't

know who on earth he was talking about. Ford wasn't a man of facts and data but a man of impressions, and that's what's interesting about him.

AW: What changes would you like to see in literary studies today? What are your thoughts on trends that you have noticed in recent years?

MS: When I arrived in Leicester in 1979 I had managed to go through Warwick, Sussex, Oxford, and Edinburgh (where I had my first job as a research fellow) without ever touching on, or meeting anybody who had touched on, literary theory. I arrived here and suddenly met Kelvin Everest, Rick Rylance, Simon Dentith – all of whom went on to very distinguished careers. I found this whole new world opening up, but we found that students didn't know anything about it. So we set up a course that was intended to introduce students to major elements of literary theory. That was all very vigorous and quite hard going for First Years, but good for them. In the forty years since then, the perception is that students are not very good at close reading. They live in a postmodern world and, though they might not be able to articulate them as theoretical concepts, they are quite used to the ideas of rapid cross-cutting in narrative, disordered chronology and so on. So instead of having literary theory courses in the first and second years, we now have simply the one in the second year, and the theory course in the first year has been replaced by 'Reading English', which is about developing skills of close reading. The students do find that difficult, and I would like to see them have more confidence in their own critical acumen. Increasingly I find students are frightened to say how they are reacting to a text; they think the whole business is about going to the library, finding out what somebody else said and repeating it. It worries me that the university becomes more a machine to produce 2:1s than a place where people go to find out how to live, and to take away from it a mind that is prepared to deal with the world analytically. People ask me what I am teaching. I say we teach people how to *read*. Not just literary texts but discourse: how to read the world. To see that it's a discourse. To see that there are different kinds of discourse. To see that some kinds of discourse are designed to exploit you.

Also, I think the post-Willetts university [David Willetts was Minister of State for Universities and Science from 2010-2014] is worse than it was. He's a clever man, but taking the cap off student numbers, at one stroke altered the whole landscape of university applications. This simply means that the self-elected Russell Group sucks up the vast majority of the top students, and they can go on doing it for as long as they like. I don't think they provide a very good service as a result of this, and they squeeze everybody else out of the market. Leicester has a very distinguished

English department, and has always produced very interesting students. But it's unlikely Leicester would become a Russell Group university, no matter how efficient it was, as a small university. And so particular centres of excellence in provincial universities that aren't in the Russell Group, will get ignored.

AW: What other projects do you have planned?

MS: I'm thinking about a new biography of Ford Madox Ford. There are already several biographies, and notably Max Saunders' magisterial two-volume job with which I think nobody can compete in terms of depth of engagement with Ford's work. Nevertheless, I've discovered along with other Fordians that new caches of letters have emerged between his last partner Janice Biala and various other people. There are lots of interesting arguments in these letters, about the politics of the time, about France in the thirties, about Communism, about the art world and of course about Ford. So you get a fly-on-the-wall account of Ford in his last decade, which is largely a fairly misty period in Ford biography. Biala met both Max and Alan Judd, another biographer, but she wouldn't talk about her and Ford's personal life. These letters suddenly open all that up. It's interesting to use this decade as a lens through which to view the rest of his life, and to bring him into focus a bit more. I've found reading other biographies that I've never *really* got this guy: what exactly was ticking away in his unconscious? One crucial thing was that he was a paranoid liar, and this irritated people about him. I'm very interested in why it was that somebody with his intellect and sense of honour would do this. Another extraordinary thing about Ford is that he helped an enormous amount of people, as he was a fantastic talent spotter. Then there are Ford's articles on impressionism, which are fascinating even now, about the technical problems of 'rendering', as he put it, the world through fiction. My book will be a form of introduction to people who don't know anything about him.

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