



## Acton, Harold (1904-1994)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Among the "Bright Young Things" of British society during the 1920s, few shone quite as brightly as Harold Acton. Known for his flamboyant dandyism and his extraordinary demeanor, he was the object of frequent mention in gossip columns. He may also have been the inspiration for the notorious Anthony Blanche, the *outré* homosexual undergraduate character in Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), although Waugh himself claimed that Brian Howard inspired the character.

Although he was at various points in his long life a poet, novelist, historian, university lecturer, Royal Air Force officer, and philanthropist, Acton's true vocation was that of an aesthete with a mission, in his own words, to "excite rage in the hearts of the Philistines."

Sir Harold Mario Mitchell Acton was born at Villa la Pietra, his family's estate near Florence, Italy, on July 5, 1904. His father claimed to be the descendant of an aristocratic English Catholic family who had resided in Italy since the eighteenth century, and his mother was the daughter of a wealthy American family.

Given his background, Acton was inevitably an exotic outsider as a student at Eton and subsequently Christ Church, Oxford. With his penchant for shocking narrow minds, he strove to emphasize rather than repress his eccentricities and seeming decadence and based his values on fashion, art, fantasy, and extravagant decorum, all of which flew in the face of traditional Victorian mores and masculine ideals.

While still an undergraduate, Acton published two volumes of poetry, *Aquarium* (1923) and *An Indian Ass* (1925). He was editor of the journal *Oxford Poetry* for one year (1924), in which he declared himself an advocate of "post-[T. S.] Eliot" verse.

One of the best-known anecdotes of Acton's undergraduate years involved his reciting Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* through a megaphone at a garden party at Worcester College, an action replicated by Waugh's fictional character. Acton became acquainted with Waugh, who engaged in homosexual affairs at Oxford, while both were undergraduates. Waugh was obviously fascinated with Acton, as the latter probably served as a model not only for Blanche but also, in part, for the outrageously queeny Ambrose Silk in *Put Out More Flags* (1942).

Acton returned to Italy after receiving a baccalaureate degree in 1926, and published a historical work, *The Last Medici* (1932). Distressed with the expansion of fascism in his native country, he departed for China, and resided there from 1932 until the beginning of World War II. While there, he taught English literature at Peking National University, translated and published an edition of Chinese poetry, and cultivated a predilection for Chinese art and drama. With the outbreak of war, he returned to England and joined the Royal Air Force. He saw duty in India and Ceylon, and, by his own account, was "humbled yet exhilarated" in the company of heroic men.

In 1945, Acton resumed his residence in Italy and set about writing his autobiographical *Memoirs of an Aesthete* (1948), the work for which he is primarily remembered. In this volume and its sequel, *More*

*Memoirs of an Aesthete* (1970), Acton is, for the period in which he wrote, uncommonly open about his sexuality.

His most exacting effort, however, is a two-part study and vindication of the monarchy his paternal ancestors had allegedly long served, *The Bourbons of Naples* (1957) and *The Last Bourbons of Naples* (1961).

Acton was awarded the distinction of Knight Commander of the British Empire in 1974.

Acton died at Villa la Pietra on February 27, 1994. Having no immediate heirs, he left his \$500,000,000 estate, including his Italian Renaissance villa and extensive art collections, to New York University.

Following his death, however, DNA testing allegedly revealed the existence of a half-sister, whose heirs have challenged his will. Although Italian courts have rejected the claim, it continues to make its way through U.S. courts.

### **Bibliography**

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