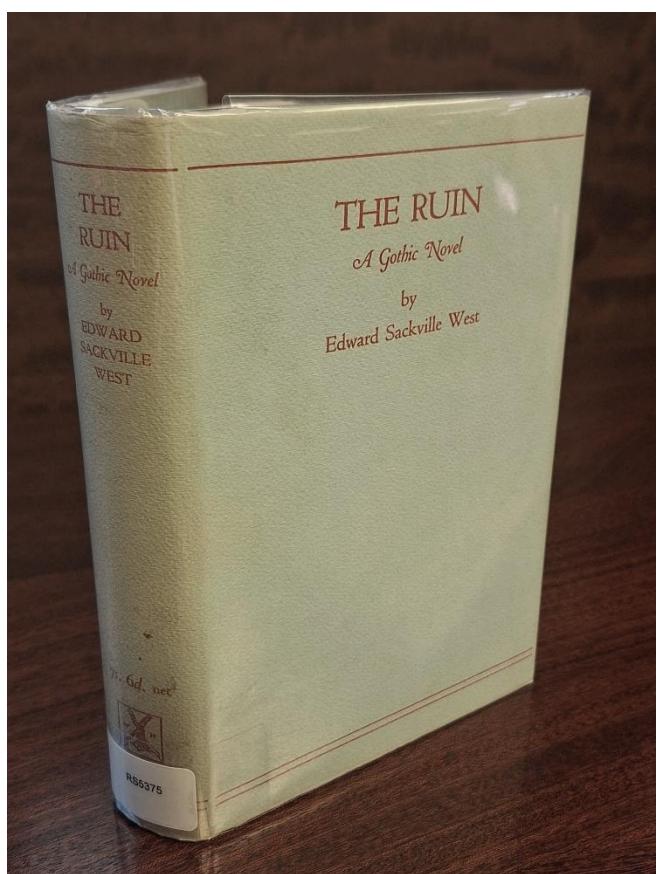


## Edward Sackville-West's Marcus Fleming: New College Anti-Hero?

1924—exactly one hundred years ago—was scheduled to see the publication of the debut novel by Edward Sackville-West (1901–1965), the cousin of novelist and gardener (and Virginia Woolf's paramour) Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962). In September 1922, Edward Sackville-West, a gifted young pianist and talented student at Christ Church, Oxford—Eddy, as he was always known—began writing what would become *The Ruin*, completing it the following September. And by the very beginning of January 1924, the publishing house William Heinemann appeared initially to have agreed to publish it, because on 6 January 1924 Eddy was writing:

It worries me to think how much I shall regret having published *The Ruin*. It is so certain to be misunderstood . . . If only I could get through a day or so without thinking of Jack. I don't think he yet realises what I have gone through. *The Ruin* does not appear to have enlightened him, as I hoped it would. He never writes to me now.



New College Library, Oxford, RS5375

But just a few days later, on 16 January, Eddy wrote again, having then had an 'interview with Byard'—Theodore Byard, former opera singer and then a director of Heinemann's—recording: 'Had to agree to suspend the Ruin'.<sup>1</sup> The reason? It was felt that this partially autobiographical novel had characters too identifiable with the real people on whom they were based. A nineteen-year-old Denzil Torrent, youngest in *The Ruin*'s dysfunctional, hypersensitive, and extraordinarily overwrought family of four children, was clearly Eddy—and, indeed, about the same age as Eddy was when he wrote the novel. But who was this 'Jack', who was so happily and unhappily dominating Eddy's thoughts in 1924?

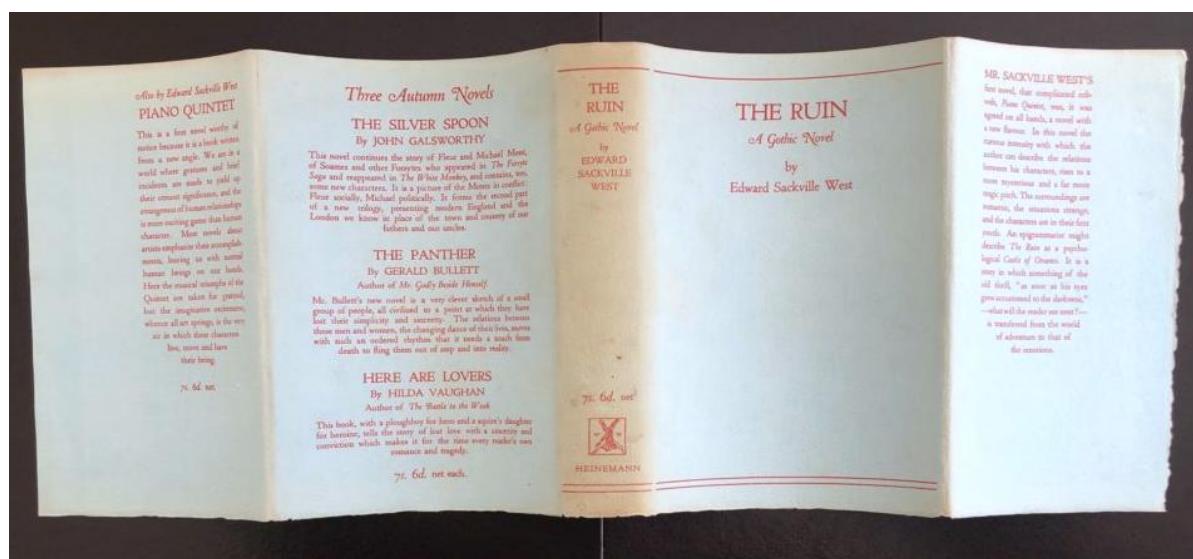
Attractive, manipulative, dangerous (devilish, even) Marcus Fleming, a friend of Denzil's up at Oxford who comes to stay at the Torrents' family home of Vair in Kent—a fictional version of the Sackville family's Tudor pile, Knole House in Sevenoaks—is quite evidently New College student John ('Jack') Willey McDougall (1903–1976). And *The Ruin* presents a

devastatingly damning portrait of him, Denzil's Oxford friend Marcus, with whom Denzil is so very infatuated, and by whom he is so held in thrall. So damning and injurious it was, in fact, that publishing the book then gave both Eddy and Heinemann's pause for thought. Thus, the novel was (temporarily) put aside. Instead, Eddy worked on another tamer novel, and, following a contract of 18 March 1925 with Heinemann (again), his novel *Piano Quintet* appeared in May of

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Michael De-la-Noy, *Eddy: The Life of Edward Sackville-West* (London: Bodley Head, 1988), pp. 91–2, 92. For this biography, De-la-Noy drew upon unpublished letters and Eddy's diaries originally held in the Sackville family's library at Knole House, Sevenoaks, to which Lionel Sackville-West, 6th Baron Sackville—Eddy's heir as Lord Sackville—gave the biographer unrestricted access. Useful, if not entirely reliable, *Eddy*, however, does not provide full source citations.

that same year. This book, too, was not without its autobiographical elements: the violist and cellist of the fictional quintet are based on two of Eddy's Oxford friends—Balliol man and novelist L. P. Hartley (1895–1972), and fellow Christ Church student, and later New College fellow and Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature, Lord David Cecil (1902–1986). A review in *The Spectator* talks of 'the tremendous complexity and subtlety' of the novel's execution, calling the book a 'very remarkable first novel'; the *Times Literary Supplement* notes 'an astonishing quality of maturity', 'remarkable' skill, 'the fluidity and suggestiveness of a piece of chamber music'—and, 'for a first novel this is a brilliant performance'.<sup>2</sup> Only, of course, it wasn't. It was his second novel.

Heinemann's, in the end, did not hold back for long, and in the latter half of 1926 they duly published *The Ruin: A Gothic Novel*. Today copies of it are held by just half a dozen academic libraries in the UK, as well as New College Library, which has a notably fine one in a pristine dustjacket—incidentally promoting the latest novel of New College alumnus John Galsworthy, *The Silver Spoon* (1926), in the year Galsworthy was elected honorary fellow of our college. There is no doubting the book's power. A 1951 appreciation of Eddy as novelist in *The Month*, a Catholic journal—Eddy was received into the Church on 17 August 1949—calls *The Ruin* 'an extraordinarily mature and interesting novel to have been written by a young man of twenty-one', and reserves yet higher praise for his 1934 novel *The Sun in Capricorn*: 'one of the most remarkable . . . of the last fifty years'.<sup>3</sup> (It is a great pity Edward Sackville-West's novels have fallen out of fashion as to be so little read today; they are much more interesting than this obscurity might suggest.)



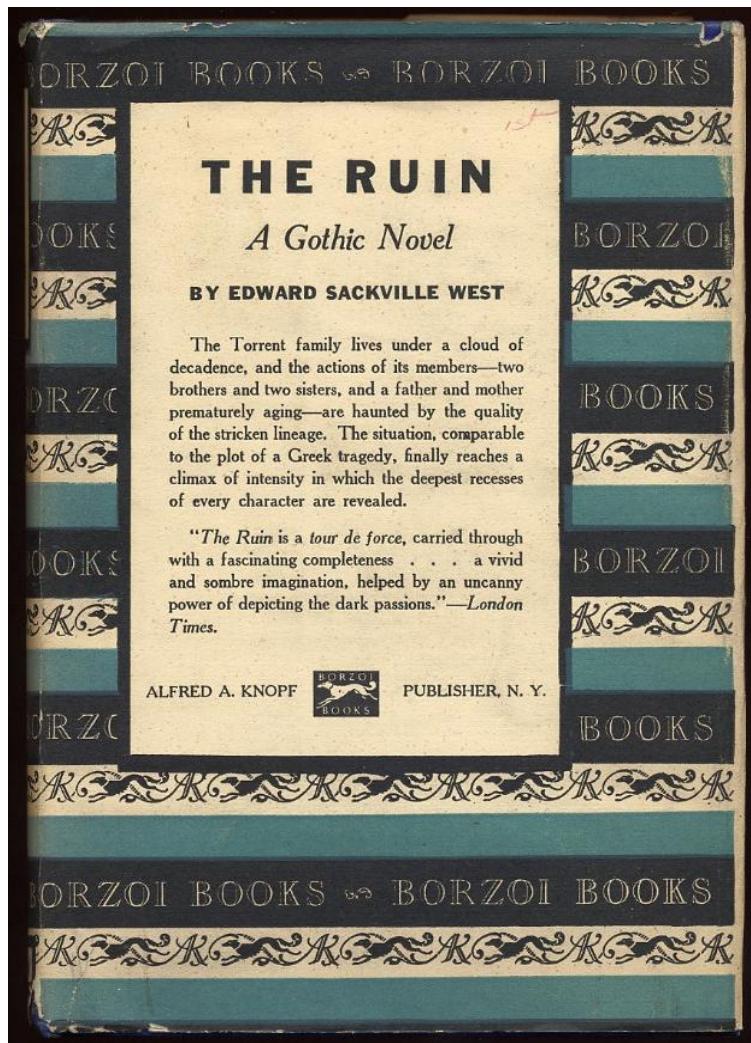
New College Library, Oxford, RS5375—full dustjacket

However, when *The Ruin* was reviewed, it was often judged in terms of its being a second novel from its author, and reviewers were thereby sensing a dropping off rather than development in the novelist's art. This time around, the *Spectator* finds Eddy's novel 'more arresting than satisfactory'. Poet Edwin Muir, in the *Nation and Athenaeum*, hopes 'this novel is only a temporary lapse', comparing it to Eddy's 'first book . . . one of the most promising which had appeared for several years', while in the *Saturday Review* the supremely skilful fiction writer L. P. Hartley, admittedly noting some of the book's shortcomings, is nevertheless most perceptive—'One might hazard a guess that "The Ruin" is an earlier work'—and appreciative too, still fully recognising, as he does, the intense, brooding power of his friend's prose:

<sup>2</sup> 'Piano Quintet', *The Spectator* (18 July 1925), 113; 'New Novels', *The Times Literary Supplement* (4 June 1925), 382.

<sup>3</sup> Jocelyn Brooke, 'The Novels of Edward Sackville-West: An Appreciation', *The Month* n.s. 6 (July 1951), 99–107, at pp. 105, 106.

The greater the demands Mr. Sackville West makes upon his talent, the more readily it responds until . . . it is indistinguishable from genius . . . [The novel] contains passages that are almost unique: passages in which the mind and soul are stretched and amplified to their extreme capacity, passages in which beauty, love and terror have found a new and livelier expression, and in which splendour of conception is matched by nobility of language.<sup>4</sup>



New College Library, Oxford, RS5381

The library is fortunate, as well, in its fine copy of the American edition of *The Ruin*; (we appear to be one of just two libraries in the British Isles to hold a copy).<sup>5</sup> This novel's dustjacket carries a judiciously selective snippet from the *Times Literary Supplement*'s review—which, however, elsewhere talks of 'this book's inferiority to "Piano Quintet."'<sup>6</sup> A *New York Times* review of the American edition, when that printing appeared at the start of 1927, would focus on the novel's two outsiders, catalysts of the Torrent family's tragedy, and the role of the sinister Marcus Fleming in particular, and the wider implications of his subjugation of Denzil Torrent:

<sup>4</sup> 'Fiction', *The Spectator* (18 September 1926), 443; Edwin Muir, 'Fiction', *The Nation and Athenaeum* (9 October 1926), 28–30, at p. 30; L. P. Hartley, 'New Fiction', *The Saturday Review* (18 September 1926), 317–8.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Sackville West, *The Ruin: A Gothic Novel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927); the other is Sussex University Library. It would also appear that there are no copies of this edition held by any other libraries throughout Europe.

<sup>6</sup> 'New Novels', *The Times Literary Supplement* (23 September 1926), 630.

It is possible to detect in the destiny of the Torrents, the decline of a whole period, an entire way of life, disappearing before the inroads of the interloper, the emotional burglars such as Marcus Fleming, the more robust, or more coarsely fibred type edging the ineffectual, yet romantically appealing, aristocrat from off the earth.<sup>7</sup>

So, what do we know about the real man behind the fictional 'Marcus Fleming'?<sup>8</sup> John Willey McDougall was born on 7 May 1903 in Surrey. He was brought up there in Wallington—nowadays south London—the third of three sons (there were also two younger sisters) of medical practitioner Dr William Stewart McDougall and Margaret Johanna Gunn McDougall (née Mitchell), both of whom were originally from the Scottish Highlands.



Photograph of J. W. McDougall as a baby, with his parents and elder brothers, c. 1903–4<sup>9</sup>

A newly built house, 'Benloyal' in Woodcote Road, Wallington, was his childhood home (Ben Loyal mountain is in Sutherland, where his mother hailed from), and life appears to have been materially comfortable for the McDougall family. The 1911 census of England and Wales records they had three domestic servants: nurse, housemaid, and chauffeur. But his early life witnessed family tragedies; his second eldest brother William Marcus McDougall died in 1915 at the age of fourteen. That following year, 1916, Jack left South Kensington Prep School to enter Winchester College, where he remained until 1922—unlike his Oxford friend, Eddy, who was sent to Eton, rather than Winchester where his own father Charles Sackville-West had been schooled. Jack was clearly a bright boy; he proved the second-best scholarship candidate to sit the 'Election' exams to Winchester in his year.<sup>10</sup> Disaster befell again, though, when in March 1920, at the age of

<sup>7</sup> "The Ruin" and Other Recent Works of Fiction', *The New York Times* (9 January 1927), BR9.

<sup>8</sup> Biographical facts are derived through online genealogical research via <[www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)> and similar sites, information from Winchester College printed sources, and from archival records and photographs from Winchester College Archives. I am most grateful to Suzanne Foster, Winchester College Archivist, for her help in accessing and interpreting Winchester College materials.

<sup>9</sup> Available via <[www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)> (Accessed: 15 June 2024).

<sup>10</sup> Recorded in an entry for Jack in the College Admission and Record Book 1899–1922, Winchester College Archives, G5/1/118, p. 150, which also suggests the family moved home to Blackwater, Hampshire during his Winchester years.

44, Jack's mother died. Notwithstanding that immense personal loss in Jack's late teenage years, he clearly shone at Winchester. He garnered a string of prizes—English Literature, French, German, Latin, Greek—and a Goddard Scholarship and School Exhibition, becoming Prefect of Chapel and eventually Prefect of Hall (head boy). Thence he sailed into New College in Michaelmas 1922 with a scholarship, two years after Eddy had gone up to Christ Church. (Eddy would not complete his degree, though that can hardly be said to have held him back.)

New College Archives reveal little evidence of his time at college, though he was, for a while, a member of the New College Essay Society. He hosted a couple of its meetings in his rooms in 1923 and 1924, and read a paper entitled 'Knowledge and Ignorance' to the society on 23 February 1924. But during that year his membership then lapsed and, following re-election to the society, promptly relapsed.<sup>11</sup> Jack would graduate with a Second in 1926, and it is telling that even in Winchester's own magazine, *The Wykehamist*, an obituary for him would record a sense of youthful promise unfulfilled:

It was sometimes thought that despite his great charm and brilliant powers of conversation he never quite realised his full potential, perhaps because he was too successful too young.<sup>12</sup>

Jack inherited his late mother's facial features, as is evident from school photographs of him, held in Winchester College Archives, which include these two below, from 1921 and 1922:



Photograph of Winchester College Prefects, 1921 [detail]—showing J. W. McDougall (front, centre)

Winchester College Archives, Winchester, G5/8/5

This and the following image © Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of Winchester College

<sup>11</sup> New College Essay Society Minute Book (January 1923–January 1928), New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 3566, pp. 16, 40, 48.

<sup>12</sup> 'Obituaries', *The Wykehamist* 1251 (3 November 1976), 9–10, at p. 9.



Photograph of Winchester College Officers, 1922 [detail]—showing J. W. McDougall (centre)  
Winchester College Archives, Winchester, G5/8/5

And Eddy became smitten with Jack at Oxford, remaining so for quite some time thereafter.

About the time of *The Ruin*'s publication in 1926 (and a year before Philip Ritchie's death following a tonsillectomy), Philip, a friend of Eddy's from Oxford, wrote to Eddy still soundly warning him off Jack, and with a dim view of Wykehamists generally, it would seem. Philip had been at Trinity College, Oxford, and was the grandson of former home secretary and chancellor of the exchequer Charles Ritchie, 1st Baron Ritchie of Dundee, and Eddy had written to him for advice about Jack:

I do not think he [Jack] has any profound emotions of any kind, nor is he interested in anything except his own social and (far worse!) academic success . . . Winchester, which at the best produces uneducated scholars, makes matters worse. He may educate himself in a few years, as some Wykehamists do, but in the meantime I am afraid it is a poor look out for you, unless somehow you can inoculate yourself.<sup>13</sup>

Such an assessment of Jack may well be very unfair. But what seems clear is that Eddy had written *The Ruin* partially to excise Jack from his own emotional and sexual preoccupations, though without success, and in 1924 even travelled to Freiburg, Germany for psychoanalysis and aversion therapy treatment from Dr Karl Martin to 'inoculate' himself against (or 'cure') his own homosexuality, likewise unsuccessfully.

Eddy's biographer Michael De-la-Noy is certain Eddy and Jack had an 'affair', though evidence really seems inconclusive.<sup>14</sup> The year before—1923—Eddy and Jack had travelled

<sup>13</sup> Cited in De-la-Noy, *Eddy*, p. 105.

<sup>14</sup> De-la-Noy, *Eddy*, p. 130. Passing reference to Jack in Simon Fenwick's *The Crichel Boys: Scenes from England's Last Literary Salon* (London: Constable, 2021) presents an alternative view: 'Marcus Fleming [...] is all too obviously based on Jack McDougal [sic] an Oxford contemporary and one of the many young men with whom Eddy fell unhappily in love. Despite Eddy's passion, McDougal was not remotely interested: this was to be a recurring pattern in Eddy's life', p. 26. This is a useful account, and entertainingly written, but 'not remotely interested' does seem wide of the mark.

together to Paris, after which trip, back at Oxford, Jack seems to have avoided Eddy for a term, on account of something having happened, of something having gone wrong. A letter Jack wrote to Eddy from Wallington—undated, though possibly in October 1923—is revealing:

You quite naturally thought that when you had done all that you did to make me comfortable & amused in Paris, it was odd & ungrateful in me not to see you last term . . . I was very annoyed on that occasion when you practically told me that you thought by my heartlessness I was making you ill . . . & I really wanted to leave Paris at once . . . I stayed on, as if nothing had happened, & probably gave you no pleasure: it was in fact perhaps a mistake. . . . But having done so, I wanted then to give my rather ruffled nerves a long rest, and did so for last term. Now they are rested & the affair can either start again or not, as you like. All this must seem to you too cold & detached a manner of discussing an intimate relationship.<sup>15</sup>

What are we to make of ‘the affair’ and ‘an intimate relationship’? Can we really deduce affair, as in love affair? How close and affectionate is intimate? Could it be an ‘affair’ as in, whatever thing or situation it was that was going on between these two male undergraduate friends, which perhaps defied obvious categorisation? Jack goes much further than normal in this heartfelt confessional letter, as he tries to spell things out (whatever those ‘things’ might be), and as the postscript reveals of his sense of emotional vulnerability arising from his own conciliatory openness towards Eddy. And he certainly wants to keep such effusions completely confidential between the two of them:

merely or offends

P.S. Please, even if this letter ^ amuses ^ you (& I am facing that) do not show it to anyone.<sup>16</sup>

In another letter (also likely 1923) and now held in the British Library too, Jack writes from Wallington this time to ‘My dear Eddie’—Eddy/Eddie spellings seem somewhat interchangeable. He signs off most affectionately, while at the same time projecting forwards—both formulaically and with a degree of vagueness—to a time when he might imagine himself the father of sons (thereby presupposing, to an extent, a heteronormative standpoint both of and for himself):

The longer I stay at Park Farm, the more convinced am I that I shall be charming to the tutors of my sons, if I have at any time the one or the other . . .

Much love—I don’t know where you live in London.

Jack.<sup>17</sup>

Eddy would make attempts to wean himself off Jack, but what is recorded in the Epilogue to *The Ruin*, albeit inspired by real currents in Eddy and Jack’s relationship, remains of course only fiction:

Marcus, that vain egotist, with his insidious charm of manner and appearance, could never have held him long . . . Marcus had gone down from Oxford the term before he visited Vair, so that it was not likely that he and Denzil would have met again. The latter . . . would scarcely have gone out of his way to seek out Marcus again, and thus open the wound that had gradually healed since the raw and unpleasant scene that had passed between them that night.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Edward Sackville-West Papers, Vol. II, The British Library, Additional MS 68905, ff. 17r–20v, at ff. 17v–20v; also quoted (lacking full citation) in De-la-Noy, *Eddy*, pp. 86–7.

<sup>16</sup> British Library, Add. MS 68905, f. 20v.

<sup>17</sup> British Library, Add. MS 68905, ff. 29r–32v, at ff. 29r, 31v.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Sackville-West, *The Ruin: A Gothic Novel* (London: William Heinemann, 1926), p. 359, New College Library, Oxford, RS5375.

Such, then, is the novelistic account. But in 1930, Jack was visiting Eddy again at Knole House in Sevenoaks; their friendship had evidently weathered the storms.

One storm had been occasioned by Eddy's loaning to Jack at New College his manuscript of *The Ruin* before the book was published. Jack acknowledged it in a postcard (presumably of 1923) that he wrote to Eddy from New College—'I have just read your book, & I got a great deal of pleasure in the reading; more pleasure than I have in a book for a long time'.<sup>19</sup> Jack then, on an undated Wednesday, pens a second card (writing on the back of Christ Church, Oxford stationery this time), suggestive now of a closer, far more discerning reading—'I enjoyed it very much: but if you really think what you say of what I take to [be] my character, why do you rashly continue to see me?'.<sup>20</sup> And then there is a longer letter Jack writes from Wallington, which starts off 'O my God!', clearly in response to an angry communication from Eddy, in which Jack now tries to backtrack from his mildly critical query that has evidently so agitated Eddy, though with once again a degree of remonstrance still: 'you should be delighted that you can now fitly so arrange matters, that I shall "have seen the last of you"'.<sup>21</sup> A lovers' tiff? Not necessarily—they were not necessarily lovers. The 1951 appreciation of Eddy's fiction we considered already (one of the very few published) identifies in Marcus Fleming a recurring prototype in Eddy's novels, namely: 'the handsome, virile man, unscrupulous and emotionally irresponsible, by whom the weaker characters . . . are inevitably victimized'. And there is certainly something in Eddy's character suggesting he himself was drawn to (the idea of) relationships with such men; (another short piece on Eddy, indeed, sums him up as a 'queer, addictive, hyperactive, lonely sado-masochist').<sup>22</sup>

But perhaps, in any case, Jack had every right to remonstrate. Let us consider in more detail the depiction of Marcus Fleming—the Jack character—in *The Ruin*.

First, there is no doubting from the novel Marcus's physical attractiveness, his handsome sturdiness. It is what immediately strikes Lady Torrent when she first meets him—her younger son Denzil's friend from Oxford—at Vair, her great house in Kent:

She thought suddenly, 'What an attractive man!' and her eyes took in his whole body as he sat there: his big fair head, his square shoulders, his strong thighs and ankles . . . Lady Torrent looked and saw his beauty again . . . his astonishing power of youth and the resilience of limb and muscle that forced itself upon her attention.<sup>23</sup>

Both Lady Torrent and Helen, the younger of Denzil's two sisters, engage in a battle of wills with Marcus to possess Denzil, though it is apparent from the very outset that this guest-intruder to their home will be the one to prevail. Denzil is captivated by Marcus, and when he first tells Helen that Marcus will visit, his 'voice vibrated with concealed eagerness'. Then, as he first introduces Marcus to his family at teatime, Denzil, 'nervous and self-conscious', seems fawning, overeager, and besotted, presenting Marcus to each family member in turn, before he 'crowd[s] food of every kind upon him in an embarrassing way. He ended by heaping about five pieces of sugar into his cup'. There is never any doubt as to which of the two university friends is in charge.

Both women, too, are constantly at a disadvantage, mesmerised and floored by Marcus's physicality as they are, even as they battle with him. As Helen verbally parries with Marcus, 'suddenly she was afraid of him. It was not the eyes alone she saw, but the face and body and hair, that marvellous hair—yellow and brown and yet darker brown'. And after Marcus has seduced and captured her with a powerful, illicit kiss in the ballroom, quite in spite of herself she realises that:

<sup>19</sup> British Library, Add. MS 68905, f. 28r.

<sup>20</sup> British Library, Add. MS 68905, f. 21r.

<sup>21</sup> British Library, Add. MS 68905, ff. 22r–25v, at ff. 22r, 25v; also quoted (lacking full citation) in Del-la-Noy, *Eddy*, pp. 88–9.

<sup>22</sup> Brooke, 'Novels of Edward Sackville-West', 105; Michael Wilcox, 'Queer Eddy', *Gay Times* 256 (January 2000), 72.

<sup>23</sup> Sackville West, *Ruin*, pp. 28, 29–30.

'His beauty had been too much for her. She had longed for the near approach of those eyes and that hair, to feel the touch of that skin on her lips and face'.<sup>24</sup>

Marcus, for his part, is all artfulness, dominance—amorality and deceptive brutality even—and several times he is compared to an animal. While the sunbeams that fall upon him are 'like the rays of a halo over the head of an Italian virgin', yet there is 'a merciless animalism in that expression, in those eyes—an appalling well of cruelty in that gentle look'. With callous disregard, too, Marcus Fleming articulates to Helen Torrent, with appalling clarity—and in Edward Sackville-West's extravagant purple prose—just what he is about, in terms of desiring possession of Denzil. (What *can* indeed Eddy have expected of Jack in showing him this manuscript in which Marcus is portrayed in these shocking terms?):

'I want him for my own existence. I acknowledge the selfishness of my end. I cannot live without a slave! I want and *must* have a complete ascendancy over another being, no matter who it is. This time it is Denzil, and he will have to succumb . . . Men have more influence over a weak nature like Denzil's than a woman could ever have . . . The first time I met Denzil, and it was some time ago now, I saw that his soul could be mine for the taking. I hesitated, and then I decided.'<sup>25</sup>

Denzil entirely loses himself in Marcus, to the consternation of his effete and ineffectual family. The longer Denzil gazes upon his friend Marcus, 'the more he felt himself in subjection to him. Sometimes the subjection was intellectual, at others purely physical'. Moreover, in overtones that are unmistakable, Denzil almost longs to be mistreated by him (is this what Eddy might have felt about Jack?):

As he looked at Marcus he seemed to see his arm rise up and strike out, felling a malefactor. The thought suddenly came to him: supposing he were the malefactor, what would it feel like to be knocked down?

Marcus's hand on one occasion does shoot out to grip Denzil, vice-like: 'For yet one more second Marcus held his wrist in a tight grasp, and Denzil's face became fixed in a strange expression that partook at once of pleasure and pain'. And when Marcus abruptly announces to Denzil his imminent departure from Vair, then shockingly, and suddenly, does the late realisation dawn on Denzil 'of how deeply he had fallen into the well and how difficult, if not impossible, it would be for him to get out of it', and as to how much he in fact detests 'this voluntary bondage', and in a way detests Marcus too. Edward Sackville-West's writing is quite undeniably overblown, in this his debut novel. Yet, if the reader can approach the novel on its own terms, it is not without effect. Most tellingly of all, when Denzil finally confronts Marcus, he does so in language which parallels with extraordinary closeness that which Jack had reported of Eddy in Jack's 1923 letter to him about their troubled trip to Paris ('you practically told me that you thought by my heartlessness I was making you ill'):

'Your behaviour has been very worrying to me. I cannot make out whether you like me or not. You are so *hard*. You hurt me. You make me physically ill!'<sup>26</sup>

Denzil will reappear as a principal character in Eddy's final published novel, *The Sun in Capricorn* (1934), wherein are a few allusions to Marcus too, who crops up there but as a cautionary tale—"Be careful, Denzil, be careful. I would never have let this happen again if I had lived.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 18, 38, 39, 79, 207.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 66, 78.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 124, 131, 241, 250.

Remember Marcus Fleming. . . . This man is far more dangerous. Try to remember that . . . you love so to deceive yourself, for the sake of a dubious private ecstasy”<sup>27</sup>

You love so to deceive yourself, for the sake of a dubious private ecstasy. Sackville-West the fantasist clearly knew himself only too well. In a 16 January 1928 (green-ink) entry in his self-titled 'A Commonplace Book & Diary', a manuscript now in the British Library, Eddy opens up with disarming honesty about his perennially unhappy love life, musing upon the causes therefor:

Was Jack, in essence, primarily an unwarranted victim of Eddy's complicated personality and Eddy's reckless, extravagant fictional portrayal of him as Marcus in *The Ruin*? What else do we know of the real Jack McDougall, after his Oxford days as an undergraduate at New College?

After graduating, Jack would teach for a period of almost four years—1926 to 1930—at Eton College, before setting out for New York where, for a while, he sold investments on Wall Street. Limited success working in finance in the States saw him return to England in the early 1930s.<sup>29</sup> On 5 January 1935, following the dissolution of the existing Chatto & Windus bookselling and publishing firm partnership, a new partnership was set up to carry on the business<sup>30</sup>—this time between Jack, the firm's chairman Harold Raymond (1887–1975), and a younger friend of Jack's from his Winchester days, Ian Macnaghten Parsons (1906–1980) (who in 1954 on Raymond's retirement would take over as Chatto & Windus chairman). The following year, 1936, Jack married an American, Massachusetts-born Mary Appleton Welldon (1912–1981)—and they went on to have a family of three daughters. During the Second World War, he would work for the Admiralty, and, as his Winchester College obituary records, 'in 1942, and for quite a long part of the War, he was in Washington attached to the Joint Chiefs of Staff'.<sup>31</sup> But it was in publishing that Jack McDougall would really make his mark.

After the war, Jack joined the publishers Chapman & Hall, forging a career-defining partnership, as well as strong personal friendship, with their star novelist Evelyn Waugh (1903–

<sup>27</sup> Edward Sackville West, *The Sun in Capricorn: A Recital* (London: William Heinemann, 1934), p. 156. Copies of this novel are also scarce; New College Library holds one (with a fine dustjacket) at RS5376.

Virginia Woolf, who was reading this novel on 13 October 1934, entirely dismisses it in her diary entry of the following day as 'Eddie's [sic] ridiculous rhodomontade—or so I judge it: like Madame Tussauds: a vast book called *The Sun in Capricorn*: a worthless book I think . . . No. I don't like him. Trash & tarnish; and this morbid silliness', *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume IV: 1931–1935*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell with Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1982), p. 252. However, another great English novelist, Graham Greene (also a Catholic convert like Eddy) provides a more charitable and discerning assessment, when he reviews the book for the *Spectator*: 'Mr. Sackville West's novel is a very long one, but, unlike most of the long novels a reviewer has to read, it is not loosely written: it is long because Mr. Sackville West has a lot to say', Graham Greene, 'Fiction', *The Spectator* (2 November 1934), 690 and 692, at p. 692.

It is noteworthy that the opening description of the (male) eponymous hero in Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando* would, though, seem to owe something to the real appearance of Eddy: 'we must admit that he had eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and widened them; and a brow like the swelling of a marble dome pressed between the two blank medallions which were his temples', Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*, ed. Suzanne Raitt and Ian Blyth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Sackville-West Papers, Vol. III, The British Library, Additional MS 68906, f. 22v.

<sup>29</sup> The *Eton College Chronicle* (ECC) records that he was appointed to the school in Michaelmas 1926—ECC 1996 (31 December 1926), 145—and that he left at the end of Lent Half (i.e. term) 1930—ECC 2162 (31 December 1930), 977. Some other factual details about J. W. McDougall are derived from an entry for him in *Winchester College: A Register for the Years 1901 to 1946*, ed. E. R. Wilson and H. A. Jackson (London: Edward Arnold, 1956), p. 252.

<sup>30</sup> As recorded in a notice in *The London Gazette* (8 January 1935), 260.

<sup>31</sup> 'Obituaries', *Wykehamist*, 9.

1966). Their partnership had an inauspicious start, however. Waugh—incidentally, a Catholic convert like Eddy, and an Oxford contemporary of Jack's—had objected when in September 1945 Jack was promoted to the Board of Chapman & Hall over a longstanding colleague at the publishers. Such was the level of disillusionment—expressed to his literary agent Augustus Peters (1892–1972), in a letter Peters received 23 September 1946—that Waugh was actually considering quitting the famous publishing firm altogether, the very firm his own father had previously run:

I should like to leave C & H lock stock & barrel but only for a firm like Macmillan . . . If a deal could be arranged later by which I went to Macmillan or a firm of equal respectability, I should welcome it but it doesn't seem likely.<sup>32</sup>

But, in time, the two men became firm friends, to the extent where it was largely Waugh's respect and affection for Jack that meant he remained at Chapman & Hall. In 1949, in a letter from Waugh to Nancy Mitford, Waugh was referring to 'Nice Jack MacDougall [sic] my publisher', and in a later letter to her of 1953, in which he muses over his playful dedication of his 1953 novella *Love Among the Ruins* to Jack, he relates: 'J. McDougall is an Oxford chum who is now head of Chapman & Hall'. In 1957 he was writing to Jack himself of how he was 'tied to C & H by every bond of gratitude & friendship', and the following year he wrote letting him know 'I do so enjoy our luncheons together'. They had indeed become close friends. Thus, by April 1961, he was writing once again to Augustus Peters, but this time in a completely contrasting vein:

Jack MacD. [sic] has practically retired from C & H and I feel no loyalty towards his successors. I am therefore open to offers.<sup>33</sup>

(Incidentally, Jack did indeed retire from Chapman & Hall in the 1960s, though remained on in an advisory capacity. So, it seems plausible that a Chapman & Hall publication *Happy Families*—a 1963 English translation by one 'John McDougall' of the French novel *Un Joli train de vie* (Paris: Julliard, 1962) by Ghislain de Diesbach (1931–2023) who died only last year—was the handiwork of our John Willey McDougall. Jack—a linguist—did, after all, win a French prize while at Winchester.)<sup>34</sup>

In 1959 Chapman & Hall had published Waugh's biography of the Catholic priest, theological scholar, and detective novel writer Ronald Knox (1888–1957), and Jack had happily and dutifully arranged that Waugh was paid the handsome sum of £3,000 for them to do so. But the book did not sell particularly well. Waugh's letter of 8 July 1959 to Jack reveals something of the relaxed, friendly informality of their relationship, and of Waugh's genuine concern for the success or otherwise of Jack's business dealings, and of the closeness of their shared social circle. (The 'Sparrow' mentioned is, of course, Jack's fellow Wykehamist and New College alumnus John Sparrow (1906–1992), by then warden of All Souls College, Oxford.):

Decent of Hatchards to make *Knox* book of the month . . . But I want to do all I can to alleviate your losses on this book.

Let us cadge from a college when we go up. Sparrow?<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Mark Amory (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980), pp. 234–5.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 311, 403, 497, 507, 564.

<sup>34</sup> A folder of Ghislain de Diesbach documents—MS 1489, Chapman & Hall Archive, University of Reading Special Collections—contains correspondence and contracts relating to *Happy Families*. Those documents I have seen, however, seem not to shed any light on the precise identity of 'John McDougall' the translator. I am grateful to Danni Corfield, Random House Project Archivist at the University of Reading, for her assistance in accessing the de Diesbach documents. New College Library holds a copy of Ghislain de Diesbach, *Happy Families*, trans. John McDougall (London: Chapman & Hall, 1963), complete with its fine dustjacket illustrated by Philippe Jullian, at RS5389.

<sup>35</sup> *Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Amory, p. 523. It can hardly be said the title of the book was a catchy one: *The Life of The Right Reverend Ronald Knox, Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford and Pronotary Apostolic to His Holiness Pope Pius XII*, compiled

In failing health towards the end of his life, Waugh took the perplexing decision to have his teeth (painfully) extracted in March 1965—‘I am toothless, deaf, melancholic, shaky on my pins, unable to eat, full of dope, quite idle—a wreck’, as he writes to Jack on 7 June 1965.<sup>36</sup> Theirs must have been a treasured and faithful friendship to permit to such frankness on the part of Waugh, who clearly valued Jack very much indeed.

The positive picture, then, that emerges of the real Jack McDougall from the letters of one novelist, Evelyn Waugh, seems, in short, quite at odds with the fictional portrayal of Jack in the work of that other, Eddy Sackville-West. And Eddy with *The Ruin*, we should remember, was writing a *roman à clef* through a most peculiar lens and for a very specific and highly charged purpose. In creating his anti-hero Marcus Fleming, who so pitilessly toys with Denzil Torrent, Eddy was both excising and luxuriating in a fixation on a young, male university friend of his for whom he was lovesick, whom he could not get through a day or so without thinking of, by whom he was entranced, in whom he was absorbed—but for a young man who may well not have reciprocated that vehement emotion. Or, perhaps more likely—if Jack did to some degree share that emotion, or something akin to it—then he certainly did not reciprocate with the obsessive sexual intensity that Eddy himself showed.

A climax of *The Ruin* is the extended episode of gothic melodrama, in the chapter called ‘The Night of Narcissus’, where Denzil, in the ominous near darkness of the oast-house, finally summons up the psychological strength to confront Marcus, his tormentor. Eddy writes the scene between the two young men in terms of a hideous final capitulation and pyrrhic overshadowing:

Denzil felt his heart beat faster in the hot atmosphere; his emotions were coursing through him and ready to break at a touch . . . Marcus’ radiant personality leapt out and covered Denzil. His powerful figure stretched up, opaque and wonderful, in the shadow, and above it his face was sombre. Denzil felt himself giving in . . . ‘Though I never see you again, I can never forget you and the way you took my sympathy and trust. You have killed all that was best in me—taken it perhaps for yourself, to add to your store. I wonder—have you many scalps? Have you always been an emotional adventurer, a spiritual pirate?’ He broke off and leaned his head wearily against the wall, his hand on his breast . . . Denzil had poured out his feelings and Marcus had drunk them to the dregs. That was the measure of their relations . . . When one man gives his soul to another the bolt is shot for ever and no amount of talk will alter the state. Marcus knew this, had always known it. This was where he had the initial advantage over Denzil. He had come to the battle with a full knowledge of the results of victory. And he had not failed . . . Marcus had desired Denzil’s soul for his own enrichment, and this state he had envisaged as beautiful. Where now was the beauty? In this shrinking form propped against the wall?<sup>37</sup>

What a contrast there is with the ordinariness of the Winchester College school magazine prose which is used finally to sum up the life of the real Jack:

---

from the original sources by Evelyn Waugh (London: Chapman & Hall, 1959). Incidentally, Waugh and Eddy corresponded too, with Waugh notably expressing his pleasure in a letter of 6 August 1949 at Eddy’s imminent reception into the Church: ‘How very nice of you to write & tell me your great good news. It is not a matter of “dim interest” but of intense delight, but not at all of surprise, for it always seems to me the natural and inevitable thing for anyone to become a Catholic and the constant surprise is that everyone does not. Conversion is like stepping across the chimney piece out of a Looking-glass-World, where everything is an absurd caricature, into the real world God made; & then begins the delicious process of exploring it limitlessly’, cited in both De-la-Noy, *Eddy*, pp. 237–8 and Joseph Pearce, *Literary Converts: Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 260.

<sup>36</sup> From a letter held in Reading University Library, cited in Selina Hastings, *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), p. 622.

<sup>37</sup> Sackville West, *Ruin*, pp. 253–7.

During the last 10 years of his life increasing ill health kept him more and more at home, where he was devoted to his charming American wife and their three daughters and five grandchildren. Died at his home in Shackleford, July 15th, 1976.<sup>38</sup>

A devoted family man—nothing out of the ordinary there. There is, indeed, nothing in that conclusion to John Willey McDougall's obituary in *The Wykehamist*, or in any part of it, that speaks of any fleeting, cruelly taunting same-sex passion in Jack's youth (his heady days at Oxford), a tormenting erotic relationship that may—or may not—have been. Surely, no New College anti-hero is to be found here?



Photograph (24 October 1978) of 'Rokers'  
the home in Shackleford, Surrey, where John Willey McDougall (alias 'Marcus Fleming') died in 1976<sup>39</sup>  
Surrey History Centre, Woking, CC1101/3/70/635

Christopher Skelton-Foord  
Librarian  
New College, Oxford

<sup>38</sup> 'Obituaries', *Wykehamist*, 9.

<sup>39</sup> The home where Jack McDougall died on 15 July 1976 was 'Rokers' in Shackleford, Godalming, Surrey. Jack appears first to have taken out a let on this house in 1938. The house was a mid-18th-century redbrick one, with a small hall, drawing room, dining room, and five bedrooms, and it was set on a 1.8-acre plot. For further details, see the 1944 printed auction papers, *Surrey: Part of The Peper Harow Estate Near Godalming, 760 Acres, For Sale by Auction in Lots, Wednesday, August 30th, 1944*, available via <[www.peperharow.info/auction.htm](http://www.peperharow.info/auction.htm)> (Accessed: 15 June 2024). Photographs of how the house would have looked around the time Jack lived there are held by the Surrey History Centre in Woking. These days the house is a Grade II-listed building; see <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1029517>> (Accessed: 15 June 2024).