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Silly Buggers

James Fox

- *The Theatre of Embarrassment* by Francis Wyndham

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I first met Francis Wyndham in 1968, when I went to the *Sunday Times* Magazine looking for a job. A thunderstorm in the Gray's Inn Road had soaked my cheap lightweight blue suit, bought in Johannesburg, and I was thinking my appearance had cost me my chance. At that time everyone – writers and photographers – seemed to want to write for the Magazine, then under the editorship of Godfrey Smith. It was both a serious and a very glamorous publication, soon to be the apogee of photo-journalism; its style was a vital part of the machinery of 'the Sixties' – all hard to imagine now. The newspaper itself was perhaps the best in the world, well financed, brimming with talent and zeal. Harold Evans had taken over as Editor the previous year.
Francis Wyndham and I later became close friends but at first he seemed formidable, even a little intimidating. He was already a legend among his contemporaries for his intellectual prowess, which seemed far too great for his job – he was loosely described as 'Show-Business Editor'. He had been working on magazines for some years, but before that had seen himself as exclusively a literary journalist. There was a sense that he was mysteriously wasting his gifts: that he should be and wanted to be writing fiction, rather than visiting Joan Crawford in her film-set caravan, accompanied by Lord Snowdon. Richard Wollheim and Colin McInnes had been overheard talking about him on the balcony at a party. 'There we were,' said McInnes afterwards, 'like two Chinese civil servants in the snow, talking about the Emperor.'

He shared an office with Meriel McCooey, the Fashion Editor. It was soon clear that this was the subversive cultural centre of the Magazine and the magnet for visitors in the Sixties – there was even a certain guilty look that you recognised in the figures leaving the office. But others who worked there seemed frightened to go in. Ronnie and Reggie Kray and their driver, Tommy Cowley, would drop in from time to time to visit, but that wasn't necessarily the reason for the fear – though there were complaints from the staff after Tommy Cowley had spent the night with an assistant in the art department,

that she hadn't known who he was. For a time, there were visitors from the Workers Revolutionary Party of Gerry Healy and the Redgraves – a slightly sinister glamour of a different kind. Although essentially modest, Wyndham was also intellectually uncompromising, with a precise and confident fluency, his wit a shade on the absurdist side. This occasionally intimidated people, and earned him the epithet 'élitist' – although these stories give the lie to that. He could be chilling if he thought something second-rate. At one editorial conference a writer put up an idea with some enthusiasm, and Godfrey Smith asked: 'What do you think about that, Francis?' He replied: 'I don't know. I was asleep.'

There was never anything on his desk. He had a gesture, forbidding to an outside contributor, of sweeping imaginary flotsam from its surface with the little finger of his right hand, which, after a while, had raised a bubble like a small wave on the hardened laminate. He appeared to sit for long periods staring ahead of him, sometimes uttering sighs, his face cupped in his fingers and hands. His pieces – some of those in this book – seemed to arrive instantly and from nowhere, without the usual 'process' of writing. From across the partitions, he and the hard-working, hard-typing Meriel McCooey, both aficionados of Hollywood musicals, could be heard breaking into duets of Cole Porter or Noël Coward – Meriel in tune, Francis undoubtedly faultless with the lyrics. At six o'clock a half-bottle of Teachers would be purchased for 'pre-drink drinks' – a deadline gradually pulled forward to 5.30. You would hear, at moments, hysterical laughter.

He survived four editors of the Magazine, and you could argue that the best owed a large part of their reputation, although not their survival to him. Two of them, Godfrey Smith and Magnus Linklater, now editor of the *Scotsman*, understood his talent and also knew the dangers. Francis avoided power, but he somehow had it anyway, Without, as Linklater put it, 'lifting a finger', he managed to subvert the sacrosanct rules of newspaper publishing. The Magazine's reputation on the newspaper for being frivolous, self-absorbed, anarchic, using acres of space on what appeared to be self-indulgence and money-wasting, revolved around Francis, the *éminence grise*. When Don McCullin and I came back from Vietnam in 1972, McCullin's pictures appeared over 17 pages – an unheard-of spread, unbelievable today. Harold Evans, who was suspicious of Francis, never quite grasped the gestation period of the Magazine, which was around five weeks from deadline to printing. He would want to pull out articles – usually on grounds of taste – when they were already on the cylinder, at the cost of thousands of pounds. And still, infuriatingly, it attracted 50 per cent more readers than the newspaper, and made much more money.

There was a serious argument, eventually settled by Murdoch, about standards and readership. The newspaper's view was that the Magazine could only be justified as a vehicle for advertising; that it should stick to consumer features; that people only really wanted to read about themselves and their domestic concerns. That is how most of the magazines were, and how they all became later: bland. McCullin's harrowing, challenging pictures of war – Biafra, Vietnam, Bangladesh – were considered the property of news pages and bad for advertisers, yet he would work only for the Magazine and its Art Editor, Michael Rand. Wyndham believed, on the contrary, that people liked reading about diverting, strange, glamorous subjects – and that glamour should not be taken seriously. He was also writing pieces in his own highly original style – pieces that were often regarded as frivolous and camp, and which certainly broke the rules. It never leaked out, fortunately, that Bailey had suggested doing a piece with Wyndham about a Martian who was working in the wallpaper department at Sanderson's – this at a time when Merlin was seen walking out of Waitrose in the King's Road. But he also pushed to have political pieces in the Magazine, which further irritated the newspaper. It often led the paper on major stories, such as the Poulson scandal and Watergate. And it often took its own line, notably supporting Biafra when the newspaper, under the Foreign Editor, Frank Giles, was supporting the Wilson Government which, with the Russians, was secretly arming the Nigerians, who were bombing Biafra. Wyndham, Richard West and, at first, McCullin, were all passionate Biafra lobby-ists. It led to considerable tension. Soon after I joined the staff, towards the bitter end of that war, Francis took the ground-skimming supply plane from Sao Tome into Uli Airport, which was under constant attack from Soviet jets, to interview the Ibo leader Ojukwu – a mission of considerable danger.

His acknowledged genius was an instinctive ability to match writers with subjects, So while the photographers (the galaxy of glamour: Snowdon, Bailey, McCullin, Duffy, Donovan, Eve Arnold, Montgomery) were attracted to the space and the design, Francis commissioned writers, some of whom had never written journalism before. There were many, including myself, who owed their careers to him and his encouragement. It seemed that he could get anyone to write: V.S. Naipaul, whose first books had been published through Francis, was commissioned by him to do some of his best work there – pieces which later turned into books. Gore Vidal, also an admirer of Wyndham, was a frequent contributor. Bruce Chatwin was persuaded by him to begin his career as a writer on the Magazine. Others, it should be said, like Norman Lewis, were not his protégés. The standard was high.

We were subjected to intense envy and dislike from those on the newspaper on the floors above us. When you pressed the button to the fourth floor, eyeballs would roll towards the roof, sneers were barely concealed. 'Trendy' was the rude word in those days; also 'radical chic'; a hard man from the newsdesk once described us to me – in the lift – as 'jammy buggers'. There was even something suspect and effete about a 'colour' magazine, as if it suggested hallucinogenics, or Afghan robes – or perhaps Edna Everage's vision of Spain: 'colour and movement'. Reality was in black and white. Yet an invitation to the Magazine's Christmas party – possibly the trendiest event of the Sixties – was eagerly lobbied for by our detractors.

Perhaps the epitaph for the Magazine – long after Hunter Davies, that other Sixties figure, had been hired to tame it – was the final meeting between McCullin and Andrew Neil, Murdoch's Editor on the *Sunday Times*, when McCullin was sacked. His images were no longer needed at the beginning of the That-cherite Eighties: they were an embarrassment in the age of greed and getting, and he was hanging around, unused, in 1983. When Neil sat him down in his office he began by suggesting that McCullin, miraculously alive and underpaid for years, should 'roll up his sleeves'. And the last Editor of the Magazine under whom Francis worked before he left in 1980, opposed the piece on Gloria Grahame, included in this collection, on the grounds that he had never heard of her.

Journalism had taken up twenty-five years before Wyndham went back to fiction and confirmed – with *Mrs Henderson, and Other Stories* and *The Other Garden* – that he was superbly gifted at it: with his compressed, restrained, clear style, a classic storyteller. His admirers now have an equally impressive book – of literary criticism, essays on the theatre and cinema, written between 1955 and 1989.

He has always given the impression of having read and seen almost everything, committing it, with perfect attention, to a prodigious memory. His passion for literature is present in pieces on Colette, ('the wise, white witch of the Palais Royal, most earthy of oracles') and in pieces on Updike, Balzac, Henry James, written with an authority and perception based on lifelong intimacy. He applied the same seriousness with which he encouraged new writers to reviving the careers of older ones – such as Jean Rhys – and restoring writers consigned by accident or conspiracy to semi-oblivion – the novelist Valéry Larbaud, 'the poet of first-class travel', and the Russian short story writer Ivan Bunin.

Bunin could evoke the transient but potent glamour of vast transatlantic liners and drowsy river steamers, of stuffily upholstered sleeping-cars and draughty station waiting-rooms, of garish restaurants and hushed hotel bedrooms. These are often the backgrounds to the erotic encounters which he loved to describe, many of them brought to an abrupt end by the intrusion of violent death. They are, in fact, much more than backgrounds – for he created his own expressionistic technique by which an almost oppressive wealth of sifted physical detail can succeed in interpreting the thoughts, feelings and actions of his characters through their immediate surroundings. Thus, although he was fascinated by the subject of sexual love, he never needed to be explicit about its performance: the highly charged decor did it for him. The results arc among the most erotically exciting stories ever written.

From his days at Eton – where he avoided games and bicycled to the cinema in Maidenhead – Wyndham has followed the twists and turns in the careers of his stars – Dietrich, Garland – with the same unerring observation. The earliest piece in this collection is on Alice Faye, and was given as a lecture, at which, after describing her deep voice, he accidentally played her record at 33 instead of 45 r.p.m. His mixture of seriousness and levity also winkles out imitation, and pretension. He takes on the self-conciousness of the cinema circa 1965, and the high fashion among directors such as Clive Donner and Louis Malle for cinematic in-jokes alluding to their own medium, 'which has produced too few masterpieces to justify this narcissistic obsession'; he debunks, with perfect logic, an entire cultural movement. He writes of Brando:

His acting has the poetry of free association in that state of mind between sleeping and waking, at the same time clear and confused. He moves at a different pace to his colleagues – the pace of a semi-somnambulist. And, as it is said that sleepwalkers instinctively avoid bumping into furniture or falling out of windows, so Brando never comes to grief. The intellect is dulled, but something else takes control – some uncomplicated emotional response, linked to pre-natal memory, infantile and innocent. This preserves him from accident, steering him past the technical traps and vulgar error into which all but the most polished professionals must sometimes fall.

Brando's screen performance is not embarrassing, unlike performances in the theatre – according to the notion, which supplies the title-essay, that embarrassment is tacitly recognised as the highest response to dramatic art. You don't have to sit in the same room with him while he's acting, believing that you are uplifted by a display of theatrical virtuosity when you're really going through the floor.

The *Sunday Times* pieces in this book are closest to Wyndham's style as a novelist: indeed, the stance he takes as a narrator in his fiction has its origin in those interviews. They are closest to his own personality and his particular wit – his fluency of expression, quickness to pick up idiosyncrasies of speech and attitude – and provide the funniest moments in what is, among other things, a hilariously funny book. The experience of reportage, of doing articles with photographers, altered, he says, his perception of the relationship between journalism and creative writing. The photographer would look after the image, so that Wyndham could 'refrain from attempting those purely physical descriptions which (except in rare moments of inspiration) are beyond the scope of words'. The best way to describe what his subjects were like was to get down what they sounded like: to pay close attention to their habits of speech. After the picture session, they would open up to Wyndham – the passive, stealthy, attentive listener, the non-intruding narrator, who never used a tape-recorder and took quite few notes, relying on mnemonic feats of memory. 'The general sense of heightened self-conciousness aided me in my secret aim, which was to invest my account of the event (while inventing nothing and scrupulously sticking to objective fact) with the intensity and clear-cut shape of a good short story.' It was a dress rehearsal for the theatre of embarrassment.
The inconsequential or, in the eyes of most sub-editors, the just plain silly, the lines they would naturally remove, were often the most revealing. 'Florence Vivienne Mellish was my name,' he quoted the portrait photographer Vivienne as saying, 'I was one of 11 children – rather amusing, isn't it?' The interview in Francis's hands becomes a story of oedipal tragedy and self-revelation. Instead of writing about Eamonn Andrews's ratings, he listened to him: 'Eamonn lives at Chiswick in a large white house called Park Nasilla. The lawn, reaching down to the river, is covered in daisies. "The purist doesn't like them, but I see them as stars on the grass." ' In the Royal couturier Norman Hartnell's 'crystal palace', as he called it, 'the glass door to the splendid salon is patterned with stars: "We added them on because ladies used to bump their noses against the transparent glass. They did, you know, they were very silly." ' Later he says:

Tonight's my Last Supper – tomorrow I swish down to Forest Mere to starve for ten days. I want to be left alone. I want to be Garbo. They said: 'We're giving you a room facing the lake.' I don't give a fig where I face – I'd face the drainpipe ...

He tracks down Anne Ziegler and Webster Booth – whose love duets from the classics delighted radio listeners – to a cottage near Colwyn Bay.

'Those are by my mother,' said Anne Ziegler, 'That's one thing I've always longed to do – paint. How lovely to put something down and know it's there for good! But I just don't have the gift. And I love good food, but for the life of me I just can't cook. Thank God I've got a husband who can!'

To take these lines out of context might make it seem that Wyndham was listening merely for the absurd. In fact, the stories are built up with great care, never condescending, never using a judgment. The narrator is removed, almost invisible; nor is there much action, nothing seems to 'happen' – a technique he later developed in his fiction, where he wanted to write about the periods in life of limbo and suspended animation. Gloria Grahame takes a series of cabs with him – she seems to be on some mysterious errand. She hops from subject to subject; they never sitdown to an 'interview'. She is like a young actress at an audition, showing off her accents, but by the end you know what she is *like*. You're as close to her as the writer in the taxi.
One of the funniest encounters is with Hylda Baker, the star of the television shows *Not on your Nellie* and *The Good Old Days*, where she invented her catchlines 'Be soon,' and 'She knows you know.' With her lapses of memory and 'near-hysterical vagueness', she offers Wyndham a drink ('Do you divulge?'), then, unable to find a cocktail glass, immediately accuses the head porter of letting thieves in to watch: 'You know, the thingummyjig, what *is* it called, when all the Government was on? *Her*, Mrs what's-her-name. That's right, dear, the *election* ...' When she finds the glass under a chair, she says: 'Isn't it lovely hand-carving? I think it must belong to the Ming dysentery ...' The author appears only twice – very briefly at the beginning and at the end – the rest is two pages of Hylda Baker talking, tripping, performing, showing-off: 'The hour I spent with Hylda Baker in her spotless home near the Tottenham Court Road had somehow reminded me of the last few minutes in a pub before closing time, when the atmosphere of jollity intensifies to an almost dangerous degree and everything seems to be hovering on the brink of getting out of control; drinks arc spilled, saucy or sentimental tunes are sung over a loud piano that isn't quite in tune ...'
There is wide variety: from P.J. Proby (little did he know who he was talking to) to Wyndham's grandmother, Ada Leverson, to the Krays. His fascination with the Krays was partly because of their mother, who had made them feel 'special', and partly because then desire to be famous contained the seeds of their own destruction – a destruction which the glamour machine of the *Sunday Times* helped along, publishing the Bailey photograph that finally infuriated the authorities, of the twins draped with two live pythons called Gerard and Reid, named after the detectives who eventually convicted them. Francis didn't abandon the twins. Outside the family, he was the only person allowed by the Home Office to visit them. He and Mrs Kray used to travel together to Parkhurst, giving themselves many little treats on the way.

When he meets the French actress Stéphane Audran, his infatuation with her and her performances as an actress force him to drop his veto on physical description. They meet at her house in Neuilly, in the dog days of late July. The story manages to evoke the menacing, enticing atmosphere of the films she made with her husband Claude Chabrol. Suddenly he is through the iron gates and the three of them are standing in the hall. Will their triangle end in murder, as in *Le Boucher*? He manages to recreate the seductive ambiguity of that fascinating French actress: how much is she the incarnation of her part in Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, the classic French mixture of the hostess of the 16th arrondissement and the tactful mistress, 'her sensual needs so skilfully concealed behind a civilised composure', slightly philistine, too? Their separate skills ensure that the ambiguity is never resolved. Audran offers him freshly pressed orange juice: *Vous n'avez pas de choix, Monsieur*. She talks with concentration about clothes mid accessories

It's amusing – in *Les Noces Rouges* I have a foulard handbag from Hérmes which I was very pleased with, it seemed exactly right for my character. But you never see it in the film! Only once, when the camera is behind me, it is just visible for a moment. Do please watch out for that moment when you see the film ...

There is usually, however, a strong Englishness about these stories, and the choices of subject, whether in catching the homeliness of the makers of the Hammer and *Carry on* films at Bray or Pinewood studios, or in the fine line in the language between the genteel and the camp, or merely the weakness for nostalgia. An example is 'The Imperial Hotel in Torquay', where all these talents seem to come together. Here he manages to suspend several characters – including the Social Hostess Mrs 'Phyl' Kitley-Carter – in a static atmosphere, with the grey sea beyond the sun verandah. Of course, nothing happens, apart from two policemen falsely charging a hotel guest with robbing jewels from a neighbour's room – but the atmosphere is charged with tension, with the feeling that aggression and embarrassment, fear and prejudice, are just below the surface. Everything seems to be going down hill, despite the energetic Social Hostess:

I run everything that's going ... Bridge, table tennis, bingo – better not put bingo, isn't it illegal? I don't want to get the head man into trouble. You meet such interesting people. Lots of youngsters I've introduced to each other have asked me to their weddings. Of course, the clientele has altered, like everywhere else in the world. I mean the money's in different hands now, you've only got to look around. Better not put that ... The success of this hotel is due to the friendliness of the staff, and it comes from the top. Do you understand? I mean Mr Chapman himself.

It is a perfectly-worked short story: whether it's fact or fiction, hardly matters. Where Ivan Bunin would have sifted physical details to get it, Francis has used language and his unfailing ear, inventing nothing.