

# SAY IT AGAIN, SAM

'LE MEME shows, see voo plaay.' Sam White's world-weary voice and appalling French accent, unaffected by 30 years of contact with Paris, carries across the ornate bar of the Travellers' Club in the Champs Élysées. He comes here regularly twice a day at 'drinking time', through the glass doors with his rolling gait, dead on 12.30 and dead on 6.15.

His drinking habits have always been punctual, and you could set your watch by his arrival at the Crillon bar, with which he had a 'structural relationship' for more than 20 years. That ended seven years ago when they broke it up, in all its splendour, and replaced it with plastic laminate. White protested so vehemently that they sent a section of the bar round to his apartment to pacify him. Yet his membership of the Travellers' Club was 'not sought' for years. 'I had a pretty bad reputation among *le tout Paris* in my heyday,' he says, 'I was tray malviewed. Tray malviewed. They did me enormous social damage, my scribblings. They were sometimes sharp, but never *nasty*, except for people I had particular reason to detest and despise.'

White's column in the London *Evening Standard*, which had its faltering start in 1947, is something of a legend in British journalism, not least because of its Australian author's remarkable professional survival. It is an old-fashioned blend of well-informed gossip and sharp political reportage - a blend that often doesn't work unless done with considerable panache. The formula is simply a reversal of the reality: politics is a game; social life is deadly serious - a winning combination stylistically, and deeply irritating to the participants of either profession.

The structure depends on wit, the kind of prose that he spoke to the noise of cackling laughter at his corner position in the Crillon bar. But to this day it is a weekly agony to write it to the deadline. David Leitch, Paris correspondent of the *Sunday Times* in the hectic days of the sixties, was one of a group which gathered daily with White at the Crillon to sniff the breeze. 'Particularly on Thursday you would see

it,' says Leitch. 'He would chat about what was going on. There would be a lot of pink gins and he would go off nodding his head and growling. At lunch, he still wouldn't know. He would be worried and bothered, as one is. The next day, you'd buy the *Standard* at the Crillon and it was always terribly good stuff. Very stylish and classy. And he never seems to have fallen beneath that standard.'

Here's White on Algeria's General Salan, written in 1958: 'His deadpan face, glazed eyes, a fixed and crooked smile, his pallor, the elegance of his uniform and the depth of his decorations, all combined to give him an air of baffling unreality.' On Ingrid Bergman: 'It is always a pleasure to see Ingrid Bergman. She has a super abundance of all the virtues of the Swedes - innocence, romanticism and emotional recklessness - and all their faults - innocence, romanticism and emotional recklessness.'

Often, he just used the simple crack: at the time of France's first veto of our membership of the EEC, he wrote, 'General de Gaulle has decreed today that wogs begin at Dover.'

White was carried away by an obsessive admiration for de Gaulle from the time of his return to power in 1958. But despite the flattery, he never had direct access to the General and had to rely on his formidable contacts, or otherwise on 'a state of mystic communion with the General, which, in common with members of his government, I occasionally aspire to.'

'At first,' says White, 'I thought he was a blustering fascist - indeed this was the fashionable view.' Then came the Salan putsch in Algiers, and the negotiations of de Gaulle's return to power. White led the paper for three weeks, day after day. It was a very exhilarating period. 'The aftermath left de Gaulle as the most intriguing, interesting figure on the scene,' he says. He was lucky with the London editions when de Gaulle made his famous speech in Algiers, with the key line 'Je vous ai compris.' Most of all, he got it right. He raced back to his hotel and filed that de Gaulle had predicted equal rights in the Algeria of the

future. The audience still hadn't fully understood it. While the other listeners were switching uneasily between applause and mystified silence, White was running to the telephone, clearly aware that de Gaulle was not saying to them, 'I have understood, therefore I support you,' but 'I've got your number.' Sam, off the cuff, in the telephone booth, dictated 'This statement deserves to rank with Mark Antony's "Brutus was an honourable man" as one of the blandest tongue-in-cheek remarks in history.'

What White admired after the 'hypocrisy and impotence' of the Fourth Republic (when Beaverbrook would, for example, send him miles into the French countryside to discover whether some French aristocrat was pregnant), was the 'quality of decision making' under de Gaulle. 'The recognition of China, for example, the denunciation of the Vietnam War, the pioneering of detente, the enormously successful visits to the satellites, particularly Poland.'

As a renegade from the Australian Communist Party, the more White admired de Gaulle, the more his disillusionment with the French Left increased. The bitter disillusionment of the Trotsky assassination, the Stalin purges, the Hitler-Stalin pact - which hit him as a young, Jewish member of the party - has never gone. He hated 'the authoritarian and conspiratorial methods' of the Communist Party in France; hated Burgess and Maclean for 'the business of being cleverer than anyone else and putting it over by deception.' His vision of the Left in France now is 'a flawed imagination. People can't visualise what a tyranny is like. It's a kind of amnesia.'

After de Gaulle, and the collapse of the Crillon bar, White made a reputation out of social scoops, reaping the harvest of his old *mondain* contacts. Like all good reporters with a professional curiosity for the ways of the rich and powerful, White has earned from them the epithets 'shit' and 'snob'. Yet he also made lasting and powerful friends among them and looked deeply offended when I suggested that he was 'tenacious with his contacts'. He moved with dazzling success into the social life

continued

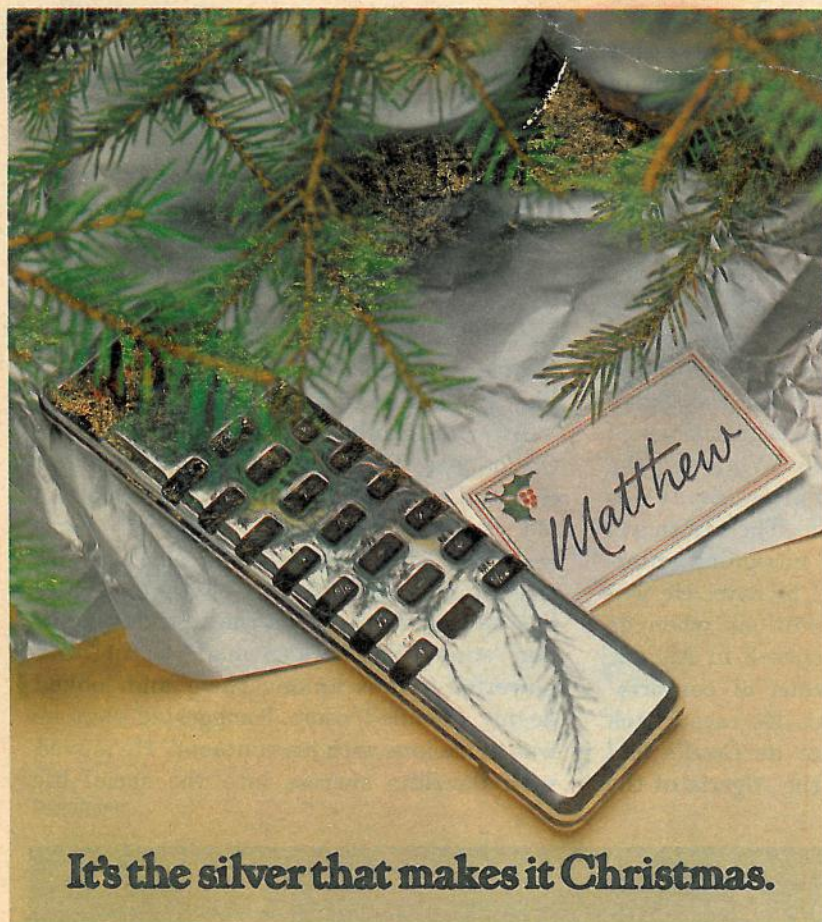
PROFILE OF A JOURNALISTIC LEGEND, BY JAMES FOX  
PHOTOGRAPH BY REGINALD GRAY



*The Costliest Perfume  
in the World...*

# JOY OF JEAN PATOU PARIS

Also available in dusting powder and toilet soap



**It's the silver that makes it Christmas.**

The Sinclair Sovereign calculator. Hand-polished gold plate £60. Sleek silver plating £40. Brushed chrome £30. Matt black steel under £20. Find the silver Sovereign at: Aristocrat, Canterbury, Asprey, Austin Reed, Binn's, Bravingtons, Browns of Chester, DG Leisure, Etcetera, Eurocalc, Fortnum & Mason, General Trading, Harrods, Heals, Jenners, Edinburgh, John Donald, Lillywhites, Lizars, Scotland, Mappin & Webb, James Ogden, Harrogate, Presents, Richardsons, Leeds, Ryman, Selfridges, Simpsons, Joshua Taylor, Cambridge, Underwoods, George Waterston, Edinburgh; Watson Prickard, Liverpool; and other fine stores

**sinclair**

SAM WHITE continued

of Paris in the fifties. His hangout was the original Jimmy's in Monteparnasse – which the Windsors had made fashionable before the war. He made important friends early on, including Jimmy Goldsmith.

He was extremely good looking, with a touch of Bogart and of Rocky Marciano; a hard drinker, and a big spender. In fact, he was already well known as one of the myth-making Australian Left-wingers of pre-war years. His own family had survived, by a miracle, one of the worst White Russian pogroms in the Ukraine at the end of the civil war. By way of Buenos Aires, White arrived in Australia, determined from the age of 10 to become 'more ozzie than the ozzies'. When Hitler appeared, he joined the Communist Party, and was expelled three years later for 'bourgeois bohemianism'. His affair with the daughter of Australia's most powerful and corrupt political operator and his flight with her to England is enshrined in 'Power Without Glory', by Frank Hardy – the Australian *roman à clef* of the times.

White's greatest scoop (before de Gaulle) was never printed. When Jimmy Goldsmith eloped with Isabel Patino, a minor and daughter of the Bolivian tin millionaire, the biggest newsbreak, almost, of the decade was under way.

'Of course I had it first, because I was marvellously placed,' said White. 'I had the scoop all to myself and I was hoping to keep it exclusive for three to four days. It was so big, it could have waited. But the editor then regarded me with the gravest suspicion and misgiving.' (In fact, White's stories were so often near the bone on libel, that a separate lead was written in London each week, in case the lawyers threw it out.) White was told to check with Patino himself. Patino received him and assured him the story was false. White demanded to see his daughter, Patino refused, and as White was leaving a young girl rushed up, embraced Patino and said 'Papa'. Patino didn't know that White knew Isabel, knew that this was a stand-in and that he couldn't have had greater proof for his story.

Still the *Standard* wouldn't have it. The story was spiked. It waited two weeks. White got a call one morning at 6 am, to be told that the story had broken, and did he know any of the people involved? The receiver went down with a hail of hung-over expletives.

White is now commissioned to write Goldsmith's biography, with Goldsmith's permission. From the outside it all looks too cosy, given the controversial nature of Goldsmith's career and personality, and White's long friendship. Researchers have been engaged for the difficult bits. But White isn't sure about

how to deal with it. He has even found that Goldsmith's friends are too scared to talk. There may be a misconception that began during the Patino-Goldsmith story. The editor killed it. To this day Goldsmith thinks I kept the story out because I couldn't get in touch to ask him. Talk about a romantic.'

Others were not so charitable. White got on well with Christopher Soames, and with the present Ambassador, Sir Nicholas Henderson. Yet he loathed Duff Cooper, who was otherwise lionised, and infuriated Lady Diana Cooper by suggesting several times in his Paris column that she had overstayed her welcome in the chateau at Chantilly, which had been lent to the Coopers by the French Institute. When she was asked to quit, in 1961, White began his column, 'It may be – and I cross my fingers on the subject – that the longest occupation of French soil since we gave up Calais is drawing to a close.'

He warred with Nancy Mitford for quoting one of her remarks made at a cocktail party. She got her own back by writing White into her novel about the Duff Coopers, 'Don't Tell Alfred'. He was Mockbar (Moscow) – the grubby reporter, cynical, drunken, snobbish. And blades were drawn with the Gladwyn Jebbs after an article with the headline 'Lady Jebb Declares War on the Bidet'. It was an hilarious piece, remembered years later: 'No doubt finding them unsightly, she ordered that they be uprooted. Uprooted they were. One can imagine the horror of the French plumbers as they went about their almost sacrilegious task.'

Complaints would be sent straight to Beaverbrook, who would reply (copy to Sam White): 'I agree with everything you say about Sam White. But as you know I long ago gave up control of my newspapers to my son, Max.'

One of the guests at the party at Maxim's to celebrate 25 years of 'Sam White's Paris,' in 1972, was Baron Geoffroy de Courcel, former ambassador in London and de Gaulle's closest aide for many years. He had made flattering remarks about White's defence and understanding of de Gaulle during the EEC vetos. So I went to see him in Paris to ask why Sam White, unlike Harold King or Charles Hargrove of *The Times*, had not been awarded the Légion d'Honneur. White was oddly preoccupied with this question: 'Therein lies a mystery... (pause) locked in an enigma... (pause) which is a considerable puzzle.' De Courcel was extremely tactful, but somewhere in the conversation he said, 'We didn't see much of Sam White, of course, at the Quai D'Orsay. I always gathered he was much of the time at the Crillon bar.' 'Not a bad crack,' said White. 'Tooshay.'