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Goldsmith v. 'Private Eye'

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The Real Avebury**

James Fox writes about the Ingrams school of journalism and its antagonists

Goldenballs

by Richard Ingrams.

Private Eye/Deutsch, 144 pp., £4.25

It was for services 'to exports and ecology' that Sir James Goldsmith was nominated for a peerage, and then demoted to a knight by the Scrutiny Committee, in what is bitterly remembered as the Wilson Honours List. Was there a connection between Sir James's elevation and his year-long battle to punish *Private Eye* and jail its editor, Richard Ingrams – an effort which was supported by Wilson and Lady Falkender, both victims of Ingrams's harassment, and which petered out in a relatively painless settlement in 1976? Ingrams's theory is that there was such a connection.

Goldsmith is no great exporter (France is without Marmite) and the ecologist is his brother, Teddy. Sam White, the Paris columnist of the *Evening Standard*, and a long-standing friend of Goldsmith, suggested to Richard Ingrams, as the heat died down, that the 'services' mistake was really a Wilson/Falkender joke. The 'ecology', according to White, was the cleansing of the 'pollution' of *Private Eye* from the environment. If this is true, we have a bizarre scene to contemplate: that of Wilson and Falkender, shouting with vengeful laughter at Number 10 – two characters from Fritz Lang. Lord Crathorne of the Scrutiny Committee, quoted by Ingrams, was confused. 'We couldn't see what these fellers had done for Britain,' he said. 'We didn't like the cut of their jib.' Goldsmith was a close Heath supporter, a right-wing Tory, and he and Wilson had known each other for only a short while. By the time the honours list was

leaked, Goldsmith's war against the *Eye* was backfiring, and his public image, not just in Fleet Street, was hurt, mostly, as he discovered to his surprise, because many people, not just the 'extremists' that he saw everywhere, didn't like his crushing attack on the small magazine. He looked like an arrogant bully using his money to break the spirit of the independent press. *Private Eye*'s 'Goldenballs' Fund had an impressive range of supporters, including 'All the staff at W.H. Smith, Kingsway (except the manager)'. Lord Goodman effectively blocked Goldsmith's chances of buying the *Observer* in the autumn of 1976, but the *Eye* case had already generated considerable resistance among the journalistic staff. It was then that Goldsmith, thwarted in his political ambitions and now finding it hard to buy a newspaper, began to back down and to deal with Ingrams for a settlement. Ingrams describes Simon Jenkins, then editor of the *Evening Standard*, bringing Goldsmith's final peace terms to him in a coffee bar, when it looked as if Goldsmith might buy the ailing *Standard*. At that point, Ingrams, too, was ready to settle:

The strain of an apparently unending stream of cases was beginning to tell. I myself could talk or think of little but Goldsmith. At night I dreamed about him. The obsession was plainly turning me into a bore as far as my immediate circle was concerned.

'Bore' is one of the rudest words in the Ingrams lexicon and he was clearly at the end of his tether.

Now comes the puzzle. What exactly was it that so infuriated Goldsmith about the *Eye* – to the point of serious loss of judgment

and ultimately self-defeat? *Private Eye* is widely disliked – with due regard for its austere investigative element and for its other merits as a paper – as being boorish, unpleasant, puritanical, voyeuristic, carelessly untruthful, sadistic etc. Here Ingrams only addresses himself to the charges of anti-semitism that have been levelled against him. In this account – a smooth display of Ingrams's journalistic and narrative gifts – he never seems to wonder why anyone should take a dislike to his magazine. He therefore doesn't attempt to fathom Goldsmith's reasons too deeply. He concludes that Goldsmith was intrigued by the personalities of contributors to the magazine, Messrs Waugh, West, Gillard and Marnham, and would have liked to have been editor of *Private Eye*. Goldsmith's aversion to the *Eye* certainly seems to have been different from the conventional dislike. It may have touched off fears of a deep and dangerous conspiracy against himself. "Is your aim to smash *Private Eye*?" he was asked. "No," Goldsmith snarled, leaning across and jabbing his finger at me. "I only want them to be more TRUTHFUL."

Goldsmith's campaign began, we discover, before he had been provoked either by libel or 'sustained vilification'. It started at David Frost's house in July 1975 when Frost (who told the story to Peter Jay) introduced Goldsmith to Wilson and Falkender. Since both Goldsmith and Wilson had, at different times, declared that the *Eye* was dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism and social democracy, the conversation must have rattled along. (Goldsmith, says Ingrams, offered the services of his private detectives to 'de-bug' Wilson's house at Great Missenden.) Goldsmith 'there and then offered to rid them of "this turbulent magazine"'. That was four months before Goldsmith was given his chance to issue 63 writs against *Private Eye* and 37 of its distributors, and to apply for criminal libel proceedings against the magazine. He had hardly been mentioned in its columns until then, although he may have smarted at a small item describing his mistress (now his wife) and children in England, and his alternative family in France.

The venom of Goldsmith's attack, when it came, was not surprising. Although Ingrams had handed him a story shot through with pure speculation and a mass of damaging, unverified information, Goldsmith long before this had shown signs of an exaggerated sense of persecution. He seemed to believe that a conspiracy was gathering against him, and a single journalist writing a critical story was taken to be evidence of this. You were *for* him, or you were his enemy. One day in 1971, for example, Goldsmith, his lawyer, Eric Levine, and a businessman from Memphis, burst into the offices of the *Sunday Times Business News* and told the editor that Richard Milner, a distinguished financial reporter who had been trying to unravel the Cavenham empire, had arrived drunk at his house, damaged his furniture, kicked his dog (he didn't have one) and was 'part of a vast and incredibly sinister conspiracy against him'. What happened was that, half-way through his third interview with Milner, Goldsmith had turned on him, his mood changing suddenly, and declared him an 'adversary'. As soon as Milner began to ask unpalatable questions, he was a conspirator. The *Sunday Times* lawyer sent a strongly-worded letter of protest, on Milner's behalf, and Goldsmith now declares him one of his favourite journalists.

Goldsmith talks of 'networks' of hostile journalists, and he keeps lists of them. At one stage in the bargaining with *Private Eye*, his settlement terms included 'disclosure of the names of authors of the offending articles who, provided they apologised, would be given immunity from further litigation'. He told an American magazine:

There are forty or fifty of them and you can find them through the media. They are extremists of the left and right, and they have henchmen in parliament, who are also of the extremist type. They are excellently co-ordinated. And they have used their columns to create an atmosphere around me.

Goldsmith is muddled, it needs to be said, in his use of the word 'extremist': Richard Ingrams may be an extremist in his journalistic methods, but, as Alan Watkins has pointed out in an excellent *Spectator* profile, he is a radical Tory who professes to despise political extremes.

Goldsmith stabbed in all directions at his imaginary enemies and, to his cost, singled out Auberon Waugh, thinking him to be the author of anonymous hostile articles in the *Spectator*. Waugh had hardly written about Goldsmith, but now he went to town in his inimitable way: 'I have never met the fellow, as I say, and know practically nothing about him. But I have seen his photograph in the newspapers and the first thing that needs to be said is that he has a disgustingly ugly face.'

It was when he visited the ruthless and retaliatory streak in his temperament on his own circle of friends that Goldsmith started a scandal that *Private Eye* picked up, and which in turn set off the powder keg of writs. In this case, there was a 'good story' to be written, one that every editor should have noticed. It was the extraordinary summer of Lucan's disappearance, which I covered for the *Sunday Times Magazine*. As the mystery deepened, its coverage developed into a flourishing industry, and the contracts flew about. For the crime reporters and the 'Nob Squad', as the CID detachment was called, it was a godsend. There were 'sightings' of Lucan from here to Mozambique, and it reached the point where the Lucan corps had the pick of the world's holiday resorts. But sometimes there was a lull. Then one side would tip the other off on a new 'sighting' and the junket was on again. For appearance's sake, the police would usually try to get there first.

The height of absurdity was the 'Cherbourg sighting'. A resourceful reporter had discovered that a certain Mme Guilpain, proprietress of the Grand Hotel, Cherbourg, could put up a convincing case for having harboured Lucan in her hotel for the night. The boys were alerted and the cross-Channel ferry was boarded. According to participants, there can't have been many reporters or policemen sober enough to pursue the trail at the other end – there was some surprise among the receiving dignitaries – but since the trail led to Mme Guilpain's bar, it hardly mattered. She herself got her one detail wrong – that Lucan spoke perfect French. That didn't matter either. The copy rolled for a whole week and one headline actually read: 'Lucan traced to Cherbourg.'

Among the people I talked to, while working for my *Sunday Times* article, was Dominic Elwes, portrait painter, exceptionally-gifted raconteur, friend of Lucan and Goldsmith and 'pariah', as he described himself, of the Clermont set, all of them having been frequenters of the club of that name. Ingrams recounts the Elwes tragedy with commendable accuracy: except for one point, and the mistake, I realise, arises from a grammatical error on my part. I had never been a friend of Elwes, although I liked him when we met for our first interview. He thought that I would write favourably about Lucan (I hadn't yet met Lady Lucan), and he turned out to be wrong. He introduced me to some of Lucan's friends, and I commissioned a portrait from him of the Clermont set. (This portrait included Goldsmith.)

When the article appeared, as Ingrams says, 'it caused a minor sensation at the Clermont.' It was certainly not their vision of the Lucan saga, but worse, the cover showed Annabel Birley with her arm around Lucan, and inside were Goldsmith, Lucan, Annabel Birley, Elwes, holidaying at Acapulco. Goldsmith would not accept Elwes's denials that he had given me the pictures: he must know by now that they did not come from Elwes. His world had once again been invaded, this time from the inside.

According to Ingrams, Goldsmith then began 'the hounding of Elwes'. Doors were closed to him, waiters instructed not to serve him, friends vanished. His friend Nigel Dempster tried to mediate, but Goldsmith would not speak to him. Dempster met Elwes a few days later in Spain and described his

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state: 'He was trembling, stuttering, rambling, almost incoherent. He was unable to eat, he had to be helped down the steps, he kept dropping glasses.' Soon after he came back to London, Elwes committed suicide and the note on his pillow read: 'I curse Mark [Birley] and Jimmy [Goldsmith] from beyond the grave. I hope they are happy now.'

When Ingrams and Patrick Marnham wrote the story, after Elwes's memorial service, they widened it considerably and turned it, in Ingrams's words, into an 'attack'. Lifting a line from my *Sunday Times* article that mistakenly reported Goldsmith at a lunch with the 'Lucan inner circle' after his disappearance, they made a series of false assumptions that suggested Goldsmith was obstructing the police, as head of the group. (At this point, neither they nor I were aware that the *Sunday Times* had apologised by letter for including Goldsmith in this lunch.) They then questioned, too, Goldsmith's suitability to be chairman of Slater Walker, and a week later wrote of an 'intriguing connection' between Eric Levine, Goldsmith's lawyer, and T. Dan Smith. 'At no time during this period,' writes Ingrams – or is it his libel lawyer? – 'was I conscious that we were doing anything special or taking any particular risk with regard to libel.'

Private Eye only began the hard investigative spade-work when the writs came in – they made no reference to the Elwes 'hounding' story – and from then on there was some pretty fancy muckraking on both sides. First, they raked for details of misconduct on the part of Eric Levine, to support their story. They were assisted by John Addey, public-relations consultant, and Leslie Paisner, a very respectable senior partner in a law firm where Levine had worked. (Ingrams states that Addey got his information from Paisner by deception.) But the extraordinary affidavits, one written on Goldsmith's typewriter, the other on Levine's, in which they retracted their information and in Addey's case accused the *Eye* of blackmail, are still not explained, though Addey did say to Ingrams: 'I didn't realise they were so powerful.' Paisner's statement is in the style of a show-trial confession.

'I have to say that when I first read it myself,' remarked Mr Justice Donaldson, 'my first reaction was "Is the man mad? Or has someone twisted his arm?"' Mr Justice Widgery spoke of 'the mystery as to whether they had been got at, and if so by whom'. These were the affidavits that Goldsmith showed around Fleet Street editors to prove to them that a 'conspiracy' was afoot. He was also employing private detectives to rummage through the *Eye* dustbins, which Lewis Hawser QC, Goldsmith's barrister, had to confess to, in some embarrassment, in court. At the same time Wilson was offering lists of *Private Eye* informers.

As Ingrams recalls the hours spent in committal proceedings, injunction hearings, contempt of court proceedings, the appeal court – winning most of the way, and with Goldsmith mysteriously grinning and nodding from across the courtroom – he gives the impression of having wanted at the time, above all, to maintain the right to attack whom he pleased, and Goldsmith in particular. 'Perhaps it was something to do with his bullying talk about "hounding" us – Elwes style – or his arrogant assumption that he could control what *Private Eye* said about him.' 'The important victory that *Private Eye* had won,' he says, 'and which was not in any way jeopardised by the settlement, was to establish our freedom to write about Goldsmith.' And yet the criminal libel charge – with its almost unlimited licence of interpretation and dangerous implications for the press – was never settled. Ingrams thinks he would have lost it, and gone to prison.

The Ingrams school of journalism is the school of 'attack'. It is a word he often uses, and his 'text', as he calls the quotation with which he prefaces the book, is a line from Dr Johnson: 'Few attacks either of ridicule or invective make much noise, but by the help of those that they provoke.' This is very different from a noble spirit of investigative journa-

lism, and Ingrams's stand for the freedom of his own press seeks to push the rules a long way. I can't think of any justification for printing stories that just aren't true. I know the time and slog required to get them right. And I also know that there are journalists who get them wrong and don't appear to mind. If the victim protests, that proves him guilty.

Ingrams tells the story of two journalists from the *People* who sued him for saying that they had paid for the anarchist Stuart Christie to go to bed with a prostitute. 'It was perhaps not a very serious charge to make against two muckraking journalists,' writes Ingrams. It cost him £10,000 and look who's muckraking.

That's Ingrams as the ayatollah, caning women for wearing their skirts too short. And he applies the same technique to people who upset his puritanical sense of propriety. Kenneth Tynan is described in this book as 'theatre critic and impresario of the pornographic revue, *Oh, Calcutta*'. Ingrams is proud of being first to 'break' the story of Lady Falkender's illegitimate children.

It would seem that Goldsmith does not really understand journalists and their methods. A mistake made in the rush of the moment is, to him, proof of enmity, maliciousness. 'See-through journalism' is an odd expression to find on the lips of a man who has acquired a magazine. Perhaps it all goes back to a tragedy in his life, when he was mercilessly harassed by the press at the time of his elopement with Isabel Patino. She died in childbirth four months after their marriage, and Goldsmith hated the sight of press cameras after that. And yet it may also be true that he secretly admires journalists.

He has failed to grasp that a good journalist – like his friend Sam White – depends on contacts for survival. White's only 'network' was the Crillon bar, with which, to use his own phrase, he had a structural relationship for many years. And during that time, Goldsmith was one of White's best contacts. When White's biggest scoop appeared – the Patino elopement – his news desk didn't believe it, and spiked it. White sat on the story for three weeks before the opposition got it. To this day, according to White, Goldsmith believes that White kept it to himself out of loyalty and affection for his friend. White ends this tale by growling: 'How naive can you get?' □