

In Memoriam: Alexander Waugh (1963 – 2024)



by Jeffrey Burghauer

Although I wasn't particularly close with Alexander Waugh, even our few encounters gave me a sense of his peculiar greatness. I've been reflecting on this since Monday, when it was announced that Mr. Waugh had died following a spell of cancer, aged 60.

I'd been aware of Mr. Waugh since around 2008, when Christopher Hitchens favorably reviewed his younger colleague's [*Fathers and Sons: The Autobiography of a Family*](#). In it, Waugh proved himself the inheritor of his literary clan's signature style, characterized by absolute precision and an almost unnerving lack of sentimentality.

Mr. Waugh receded from my mind for the next decade, until the Covid lockdown, when, stuck at home and going slightly mad, I found myself hooked on his quirky, fearless, erudite [YouTube videos](#) making the case for Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, as the true author of Shakespeare's work. I found the videos so persuasive that I wrote an epigram:

*Exhausted by the weight of heresies
I can't but feel reveal the Truth,
(How they have multiplied since youth!)
I now must find the space in which to squeeze
Another one. It brings me no delight
That Alexander Waugh is likely right.*

"Dear Mr. Waugh," I wrote the man. "I'm an American poet, and a fan of your YouTube channel. I've written an epigram about your work, which I plan to publish somewhere over the next few

months. As a courtesy, I've attached it."

The reply came within ten minutes. "Dear Mr. Burghauer," it began. "Wonderful! Much flattered by it and in admiration of your skill. Welcome back the epigram! Thank you for sending it. Let me know when it finds a publisher. Would you let it be published in the De Vere Society Newsletter?"

Mr. Waugh promptly saw to it that my frivolous little poem circled the globe. In addition to the De Vere Society Newsletter, he included it in a column for the *Catholic Herald*. He forwarded a copy to author Elizabeth Winkler, who cited it in her wonderful [*Shakespeare was a Woman and Other Heresies*](#) (2023). Word even reached me that my epigram had stimulated the admiration of a professor in Mongolia.

Mr. Waugh was wholeheartedly committed to his causes. Like any self-respecting Waugh, he was always ready for a fight. When I suggested that *New English Review* might publish the epigram, he warned me to be prepared for combat.

"I should love to run the epigram in [the De Vere Society Newsletter]," he wrote me. "[I]t would be even more of a coup, oddly enough, if it were in *New English Review* first. However, they are very likely to be super-tense Stratfordian denialists who won't like your message even though the excellence of your craft is undeniable." I explained that *NER* was almost uniquely tolerant of heterodoxy.

Mr. Waugh was a great enthusiast—an essential quality of the best teachers. What he liked, he *really* liked; and what he really liked was there to be shared. If we inhabited a world in which people other than ideological hacks could become tenured professors, Mr. Waugh would have been an academic educator of towering renown. Most educators nowadays inhabit two categories: scholars who know their stuff, but possess all the charisma of a rhubarb, and those (the majority, alas) who have absolutely electric dynamism, but don't know anything

about anything. Alexander Waugh was the real deal—the full package.

Mr. Waugh's publishing credits suggest the range of his erudition: [*Classical Music: A New Way of Listening*](#) (1995), [*Opera: A New Way of Listening*](#) (1996), [*Time: From Microseconds to Millennia*](#) (2000), [*God*](#) (2002), [*Fathers and Sons: The Autobiography of a Family*](#) (2004), and [*The House of Wittgenstein: A Family at War*](#) (2009). And then there's his significant body of work on the Shakespeare authorship question. And, as if that weren't enough, he was General Editor of the [multi-volume Oxford University Press edition](#) of his grandfather's writings. He even dipped his toe in electoral politics, standing for Parliament on the Brexit ticket, thereby harkening back to more civilized era, when serious intellectual attainment didn't *necessarily* disqualify you from participation in government.

When I was growing up in New Jersey, I imagined that all Englishmen were like Mr. Waugh: courageous, honorable, poised, amusing, slightly rumpled, genially snobbish, a little ornery, and frighteningly well-read. His conservatism wasn't polemical, but (apparently) lived. So many of the qualities that made England the envy of the world have vanished, and now exist in grateful memory alone. Yesterday, Mr. Waugh himself joined them.

God bless Alexander Waugh. May he rest in peace.