

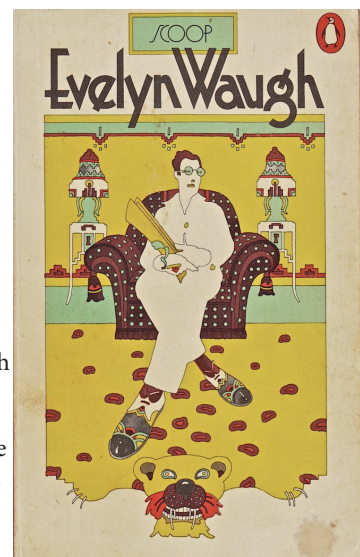
# Evelyn Waugh's books on the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–36

**Philip Woods** discusses Evelyn Waugh's contribution to understanding the nature of journalism before the Second World War.



Waugh on road to Dessye, Ethiopia, 1935

This article compares the value to historians of the two books Evelyn Waugh wrote based on his experiences as a war correspondent covering the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935–36. The popular satiric novel *Scoop* (1938) is often taken as providing valid insights into the excesses and absurdities of the contemporary newspaper business. There has been little attention paid to the much less successful non-fiction account which Waugh published in 1936 as *Waugh in Abyssinia*. Yet, it will be argued that this earlier book is a much more reliable guide to his experiences and to the issues confronting the media in reporting the conflict that led up to the Second World War.



## **Scoop as a satire on journalists and the newspaper business**

For many English-speaking people, the reporting of war, and particularly the reporting of the Italo-Ethiopian war 1935–36, has been influenced by reading Evelyn Waugh's wonderfully satiric novel *Scoop* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1938). The central conceit of the novel is that, by mistake, newspaper nature columnist William Boot – 'Feather-footed through the plashy fen passes the questing vole' – is sent to cover a civil war which is breaking out in the north-east African state of Ishmaelia. Ishmaelia was clearly based on the country which was widely known as Abyssinia then, and as Ethiopia ever since that war.

The press converge on the capital, Jacksonburg, bringing vast stores of equipment, although they expect and hope for a short and colourful war to report. Boot represents the *Daily Beast*, whose proprietor Lord Copper seems to be based on the powerful but often eccentric British press barons of the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, Waugh did construct



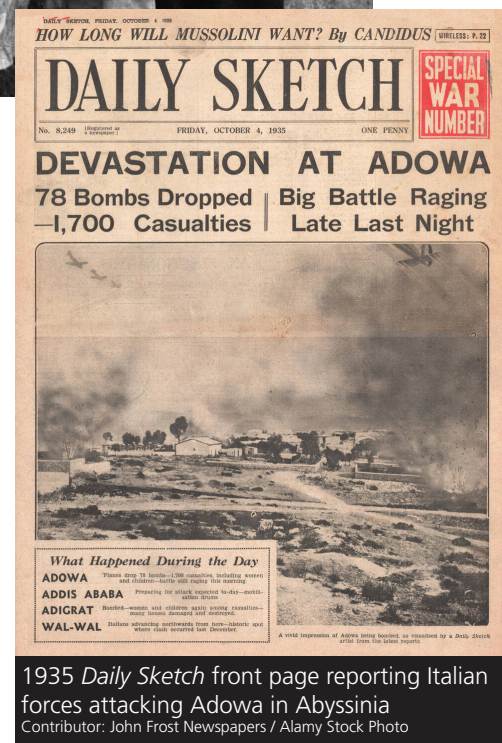
the characters in *Scoop* loosely around his own experiences as a correspondent for the *Daily Mail* in the early stages of the Italo-Ethiopian war. Although Waugh treated the conflict with humour, in fact the war proved to be a brutal conflict which undermined one of the last remaining independent African states and struck a fatal blow at any hope that the League of Nations might act as a force to maintain international peace. Mussolini's plan to expand the Italian empire in East Africa was carried out ruthlessly, using all the weapons of modern warfare against an African nation that was divided and lacked a modern army and weapons. Although the media liked to present an image of an even contest because Ethiopians had defeated the Italian army at Adowa in 1896, this ignored the Italian dominance in using aircraft, tanks, motorised vehicles and poison gas. Poorly armed Ethiopia could only rely on the hope that its membership of the League of Nations would bring in the support of nations like Great Britain and France, at least through effective sanctions if not actual armed aid. The Ethiopians were to be disappointed by the lack of international action to halt Mussolini, and the war which started in October 1935 was over by May 1936 when the Italians occupied the capital and Haile Selassie fled the country.

### Media coverage of the war

From the point of view of media coverage of the war, it had quite distinctive qualities. Firstly, a large number of reporters were sent to Africa at great expense. This resulted from the heightened competitiveness of the industry at that time. Editors felt that they could not miss an opportunity to build readerships by reporting what might be one of the last colonial wars in Africa. It was a war that could now be reached by air and sea from Europe, with only a short time difference for transmitting to European capitals. The time difference across the Atlantic did not stop a large press contingent also arriving from the USA at even greater expense. The newsreel companies and picture editors sent their best photographers to cover the war.

Most were disappointed by the reality – a lack of opportunity to reach the fighting or even to leave Addis Ababa. Laurence Stallings, filming for Fox Movietone, expressed the annoyance of correspondents at their inability to report the fighting saying, 'I feel I lost six months of my life while I was there.'<sup>1</sup> On the Italian front, the authorities were initially very reluctant to allow journalists to reach forward positions. On the Ethiopian side, reporters found it very difficult to find stories to offer their editors some return on their large outlay. Journalists all had to crowd into the few decent hotels in the capital so that the chances of finding a scoop were minimal. Even if they did find special stories, they had to get past a clumsy censorship regime and the telegraph rates were prohibitive. These were the sort of difficulties that Waugh and his colleagues laboured under, thus forming the background to *Scoop*.

Readers can learn quite a lot from *Scoop* about the peculiarities of British newspaper journalism, especially the activities of foreign correspondents at that time, from Waugh's cynical view of the whole newspaper industry. William Boot learnt on the journey out to Jacksonburg (Addis Ababa) that, though you could make friends with other correspondents, they remained rivals who would do anything to beat you to a 'scoop', an exclusive story which reached your paper before



your competitors. He also established that to be successful in journalism you had to be ready to add 'colour' and even invent stories. Boot was assured that there was no need to worry about the ethics of this because whatever stories you sent home would be exaggerated and re-invented by editors anyway.

All the correspondents were confined to the capital and so 'colour' stories were all that could be despatched: '... preparations in the threatened capital, soldiers of fortune, mystery men, foreign influences, volunteers ...' They faced haphazard censorship and prohibitive costs for sending their messages. The journalists tried to protest but were too busy watching each other and fighting among themselves to act in concert.

Eventually, the frustrated reporters in Jacksonburg were released, even encouraged by the government, to report the war from a non-existent place called Laku. Like a herd of sheep, they all left in pursuit of their stories. Boot, however, had a 'love interest' to keep him in the capital and ended up as the sole correspondent still there. Thanks to his friendships with an official in the British Legation and a mysterious concession-hunter he had helped on the outward journey, he was able to send a story back about a short-lived 'coup' attempt which won him great acclaim back home for the scoop of the war.

### Can *Scoop* be regarded as straight reportage or a formal critique of reporting?

Waugh's novel was highly acclaimed on publication and has been recognised ever since as a comic masterpiece. Some critics have seen it as an accurate description of the reporting of the Italo-Ethiopian war combined with a critical commentary on

the ethics and practices of the industry. Phillip Knightley, the doyen of media historians, described *Scoop* as '... a piece of straight reportage, thinly disguised as a novel to protect the author from libel actions.'<sup>2</sup> Attempts have been made to match the owners of the newspapers and their journalists in *Scoop* with real life equivalents. The distinguished journalist Bill Deedes stoutly denied that he was the model for William Boot, although he admitted that he was guilty of transporting ridiculously large amounts of inappropriate clothing and gear to Ethiopia, when he reported the war for the *Morning Post*.<sup>3</sup> The truth is that Waugh, like other novelists, based his characters and their traits on a range of different people that he had encountered, along with a good deal of literary invention. The same applies to Waugh's depiction of the behaviour or rather antics of the journalists. Some of this undoubtedly hit the mark or had a kernel of truth. For instance, Waugh lampooned the pack mentality of correspondents and the drive to the bottom in the quality of dispatches they sent home. However, *Scoop* is a version of the work of war correspondents which was exaggerated for comic effect. The more positive side of their work was omitted. No mention was made of the daily routine of finding and then checking sources, work which Waugh despised and avoided. Like the real-life Evelyn Waugh in Ethiopia, the correspondents in the novel do not actively engage with fighting at first-hand, so there is no mention of the dangers they faced in their job.

Waugh arrived in Ethiopia in August 1935 and, like the majority of the over one hundred reporters assigned to cover the conflict, he followed the war from the Abyssinian side only. War broke out in October but he did not manage to get to the fighting front until December and, along with many other frustrated correspondents, left the country before the decisive battles in the new year.

Ethiopian soldiers in captured Italian tanks at an encampment near Jijiga, December 1935  
Everett Collection Historical / Alamy Stock Photo



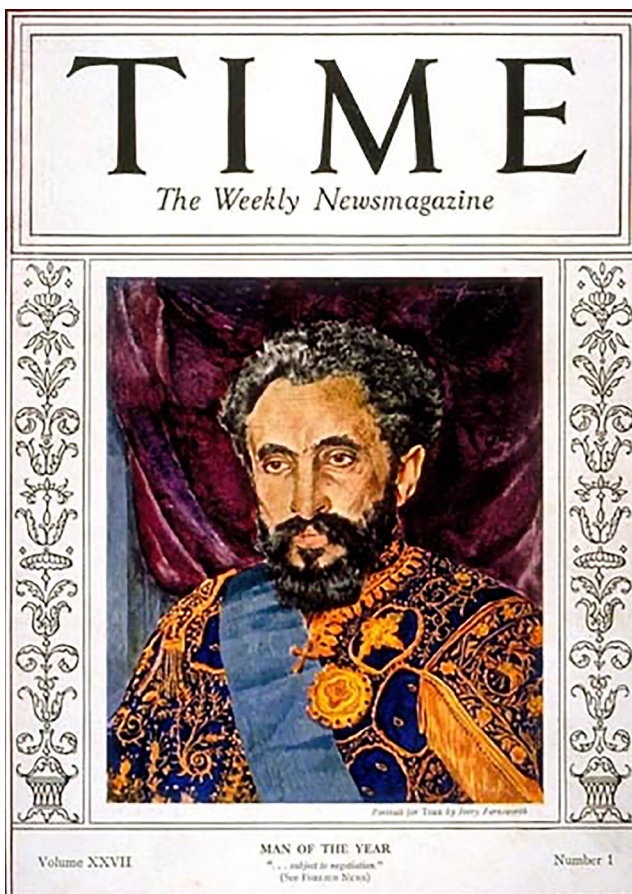


### Waugh's negative experiences unfairly coloured his comments on reporting

Like most of the other correspondents, Waugh had a very unsatisfactory experience of reporting in Ethiopia. Waugh's depiction of the journalists is coloured by this. As a famous and established novelist Waugh was looked on with suspicion by his professional colleagues. It did not help that he adopted a superior attitude and made clear his disdain for those journalists who took their job at all seriously. Having covered the Emperor Haile Selassie's coronation in 1930 and written up his experiences in a travel book *Remote People* (1932), Waugh felt that he was much better informed about Ethiopia than other journalists. He also believed that he and his right-wing paper, the *Daily Mail*, took a much more realistic view of the politics of the country, suffering from none of the idealised images of its modernising Emperor or the sentimental internationalism that permeated most of the other newspapers.

### Waugh was a poor war correspondent

Correspondents depended on finding local sources for information, but Waugh had antagonised the best sources: Sir Sidney Barton, British minister in Addis, and the Emperor Haile Selassie himself, by what they took to be slanderous attacks on them in his novel *Black Mischief*, which was published in 1932. Waugh did find one sympathetic source in 1935, Count Vinci, the Italian minister at Addis Ababa, who appreciated the *Daily Mail's* pro-Mussolini line. Vinci gave Waugh a pretty good idea of the date the Italians would invade, and Waugh decided to maintain secrecy in transmitting his scoop by drafting the telegram in Latin. Unfortunately, the sub-editor of the *Mail* in London failed to translate it and Waugh



Time magazine, January 1936 Haile Selassie, Man of the Year, 1935



was reprimanded for not taking the job seriously. Worst of all he left the capital and missed the all-important breaking story of an American oil and mineral concession agreement being signed by Haile Selassie. Relations with his editor became very cool and Waugh thought of resigning but determined to stay on as he also had a contract to write a book on the war, which he thought might start very soon. Waugh did eventually manage to reach the Ethiopian headquarters at Dessye in the north but never managed to report on any fighting and left saying that he had really wanted to be in Bethlehem for Christmas. The problem was that he refused to play the game of providing editors (and readers) with the sort of stories that they wanted.

### **Waugh in Abyssinia is a more reliable guide to his experiences in Ethiopia and its reporting**

Because Waugh had a very lucrative non-fiction book commission in hand, he had other priorities in mind. The book was published in 1936 with the rather obvious punning title, *Waugh in Abyssinia*.<sup>4</sup> The book's subtitle, 'The Intelligent Woman's Guide to the Ethiopian Question' gave a clue that Waugh intended this book to give more of a historical and political context and commentary on the war than the later novel. How accurate, though, is Waugh's description of the war and its reporting in his non-fiction account? Waugh admitted when appointed that he was no war correspondent, he did not even know how to use a typewriter, but he had the advantage of having been to Ethiopia before. The problem was that he brought with him a number of preconceptions about the country, its peoples, and the way that foreign journalists represented it. In February 1935 he wrote an article for the *Evening Standard* entitled 'Abyssinian Realities: We can Applaud Italy'. He asserted that 'Abyssinia was 'a barbarous country ... capriciously and violently governed', and which Haile Selassie had no more right to govern than the Italians. Along with

apologists for the Italians, he argued that the country was an empire itself, the result of a series of conquests of neighbouring territories by the Emperor Menelik in the previous century, and it held these territories, which differed in race, religion and history from the Amharic core, by force of arms.<sup>5</sup> Waugh had no time for people he regarded as liberals, socialists and sentimentalists who romanticised Haile Selassie and the League of Nations cause. He believed in the right of more advanced nations to continue to occupy and develop lands whose potential had never been realised. He was prepared to acknowledge that Haile Selassie had attempted to bring in some western reforms, but slavery was still widespread, and education was limited to a very small western-educated elite. Waugh was not alone in Britain in seeing Mussolini's Fascist regime in a positive light, but he was out of tune with his fellow journalists in Addis Ababa, who regarded him as an amateur who had been appointed only because of his reputation as a writer. Many profoundly disliked him.

### **Waugh's relations with other correspondents**

Waugh wrote disparagingly about other correspondents, such as Stuart Emeny and George Steer, largely because he believed they took the job too seriously and worked hard to meet the requirements of their employers. He was particularly critical of American journalists and with what he called their unawareness of the self-publicity and ambition with which they approached their calling. He even resorted to fisticuffs against the famous but unfortunately named American reporter H.R. Knickerbocker. Despite his prejudices, Waugh did show insights in his book into the practical problems and ethical dilemmas that war correspondents faced. This is shown in his reporting on three issues, that of propaganda, faking of war images and verifying atrocity stories.

## Propaganda

It is a well-known saying that, when war comes, truth is the first casualty.<sup>6</sup> One reason for this is that governments establish their own propaganda or information organisations to feed the press and public their preferred version of events. Waugh actually said that he admired the propaganda efforts of the Ethiopian government. He recognised that Haile Selassie's public statements were very well adjusted to the views of liberal Europeans. In fact, the Emperor's face and bearing gave an image of a peace-loving, innocent, thoughtful, intelligent, Christian, modern man. However, Waugh thought this image was a façade, built up by his western advisers, behind which lay a more cunning man who knew how to play off the different powers against each other. Besides which, Haile Selassie and the small, educated elite of Ethiopians, did not represent the vast mass of uneducated, uncivilised Ethiopian masses who were in thrall to slavery and superstition.

## Faking

One aspect of journalistic malpractice which Waugh found rather amusing, and which must have confirmed his opinion that war journalism was a particularly bogus activity, was the faking of photographic and newsreel images. Among the eighty or so correspondents in the capital were a number of cameramen who were sent by their newspapers and newsreel companies at great expense to cover the war. If they could not find pictures of real warfare they would have to make stories up or 're-enact' military activities. This faking of footage clearly did take place, especially in situations where editors were demanding material or threatening to withdraw their cameramen because of the expense involved. Herbert Matthews, reporting from the Italian side, told of an Associated Press photographer Joe Caneva who persuaded an Italian general to provide tanks and soldiers to reconstruct an attack on Ethiopian forces. 'Of the "action" pictures, Matthews concluded, "which the world saw printed during the war I should not imagine more than one in a hundred actually represented the real thing...".<sup>7</sup>

## Atrocity stories: Bombing hospitals and using poison gas

The two most serious allegations which were made by the Ethiopians against the Italian invaders were that they bombed Red Cross hospitals and installations, whilst also using mustard gas (yperite) against military and civilian targets. Waugh was very sceptical about atrocity allegations early in the war but by the time he returned to Ethiopia in August 1936 he should have been better informed about the amount of evidence that had been published about Italian atrocities. Waugh accepted that gas had been used but argued that it had not been a major factor in defeating the Ethiopians and that it was largely used to clear the way for Italian troops as they advanced and was not used on towns.

The final two chapters of *Waugh in Abyssinia* are based on the period when Waugh wrote praising the Italians after their victory in Ethiopia. In these Waugh became more clearly a propagandist for the Italian conquest of Ethiopia. He saw the Italian road-building projects as typifying the bringing of civilisation to a savage country. Rose Macaulay called the book a 'Fascist tract', and this may well account for the book's unpopularity.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

Evelyn Waugh's novels and travel writings are still widely read and well regarded, but his war reporting is largely forgotten. However, he has interesting things to say in his Ethiopia books about journalists and their craft. Michael Salwen is certainly

correct in saying that 'Waugh's observations provide alternatives to the mythic accounts of correspondents as heroes.'<sup>9</sup> However, Waugh overdid it in *Scoop*, as he was determined to bring out his colleagues' worst practices. Waugh's non-fiction re-telling of his experiences in Ethiopia, *Waugh in Abyssinia*, on the other hand, can be used by media historians as a valid account of his experiences as a novice war correspondent in the initial stages of the Italo-Ethiopian war. The book sets out the historical, political and social background to Ethiopia in clear and succinct, if distinctly pro-imperialist, terms. The war he reported on was probably the last old-style war of European colonial territorial conquest and the last to be covered in this extravagant way by a 'circus' of top correspondents. The main weakness of Waugh's two books is his lack of understanding of the wider journalistic context in which he worked. Many of the practices that Waugh treated as outrageous transgressions of good journalism were, in exaggerated form, actually long-standing practices in the newspaper industry. Waugh never understood the dynamics of the contemporary newspaper world with its drive towards meeting popular tastes, and its preference for the short-term, the local and sensational over the more truthful, thoughtful accounts from distant parts of the world.

## Further reading

Baudendistel, R. (2006) *Between Bombs and Good Intentions: The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1936*, Oxford: Bergahn Books .

Deedes, W.F. (2004) *At War with Waugh: The Real Story of Scoop*, London: Pan Books London.

Mockler, A. (1984), *Haile Selassie's War*, Oxford, OUP.

Salwen, M. B. (2001) *Evelyn Waugh in Ethiopia: The Story Behind 'Scoop'*, Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edward Mellen Press.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> *Newsdom*, 'Stallings Calls Ethiopian War 'Biggest Flop' in Journalism', 4 April 1936, 3, cited in Salwen, M. B. (2010), 'Evelyn Waugh in Ethiopia: The Novelist as War Correspondent and Journalism Critic', *Journalism Studies*, December 2010, p. 6.
- <sup>2</sup> Knightley, P. (1982) *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist and Myth-Maker from Crimea to Iraq*, Quartet Books, London, 1982 edn., p. 173.
- <sup>3</sup> See Deedes, W.F. (2004) *At War with Waugh: The Real Story of Scoop*, Pan Books, London.
- <sup>4</sup> New edn, Penguin, London, 2012. The title was not Waugh's preferred choice.
- <sup>5</sup> *Evening Standard*, 13 February 1935, cited in Stannard, M. (1988) *Evelyn Waugh, Volume I: The Early Years 1903-1939*, Paladin, London, p. 395.
- <sup>6</sup> Often attributed to the US Senator Hiram Johnson during the First World War, this idea has a much longer history, dating back perhaps to the Greek playwright Aeschylus.
- <sup>7</sup> Matthews, H. L. (1937) *Eyewitness in Abyssinia: With Marshal Badoglio's Forces to Ababa*, London: Martin Secker & Warburg, London, 1937, p. 41.
- <sup>8</sup> Macaulay, R. 'Evelyn Waugh', in Baker, D. [ed], (1948), *Writers of Today*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, pp. 135-51.
- <sup>9</sup> Salwen, M. B. (2010) 'Evelyn Waugh in Ethiopia', *Journalism Studies*, p. 5.

Dr Philip Woods has taught at the University of West London, Kingston University, and New York University in London. He studied history at LSE and SOAS, University of London. His research has focused on British imperial history, particularly on the use of visual propaganda in India and Burma. His most recent book is *Managing the Media in the India-Burma War, 1941-1945*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.