

The Real Sebastian Flyte

What was the inspiration behind one of the great fictional characters?

BY HARRY MOUNT

In 1944, Evelyn Waugh wrote to a friend called Coote Lygon, saying, “I am writing a very beautiful book, to bring tears, about very rich, beautiful, high-born people who live in palaces and have no troubles except what they make themselves and those are mainly the demons sex and drink.”

And so the seeds were sown for the birth of Lord Sebastian Flyte, the magnetically charming, gilded and doomed youth in *Brideshead Revisited*, published a year after Waugh wrote that letter. It is Sebastian, played by Ben Whishaw in the new film of *Brideshead Revisited*, who draws the book’s

narrator Charles Ryder (Matthew Goode in the film) into the grand set at Christ Church, Oxford’s smartest college. Charles is lured on further, to Brideshead, the Flytes’ ancestral palace, like a middle-class moth hot-footing it to the poshest of flames. But it is Sebastian who ends up getting burnt—by drink and sex, in fact, and in particular by his homosexuality.

Other demons got in on the act too: the guilt sparked by his Catholic faith, and the tortured relationship with his mother Lady Marchmain (Emma Thompson), her veins sludgily flowing with iced blue blood. The golden boy

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at Oxford, delicately wrapped in dove-grey flannel, white crêpe de Chine and Charvet ties, becomes a tarnished, broken man in rags. In self-imposed exile in Fez, Morocco, Sebastian ends up dependent on whisky, family handouts and the whims of a drunken bully of a German boyfriend, who has shot himself in the foot to escape the Foreign Legion.

Who was the inspiration for this fatally attractive youth bent on self-destruction? Sebastian Flyte's real-life alter ego was the Honourable Hugh Lygon, brother of Coote, the recipient of that fateful Waugh letter on the perils of sex and drink. It was the Lygon family who inspired the *Brideshead* story, in fact. Just like the Flytes, they had a deep well of family shame to contend with. In the Lygons' case, the source was Hugh's

father Earl Beauchamp, forced into exile in Europe and Australia after his homosexuality was exposed.

With the Flytes, it was Sebastian's father, the Marquess of Marchmain (Michael Gambon), who deserted Lady Marchmain for his mistress and, hounded out of society, made for a Venetian palazzo. Like Lady Julia Flyte, Sebastian's sister and Charles Ryder's lover (Hayley Atwell), Hugh's sister, the beautiful Lady Mary, exerted a powerful spell over Evelyn Waugh. But Waugh

was initially bewitched by Hugh Lygon, as Charles Ryder was with Sebastian.

He met Lygon at Oxford, as Charles had met Sebastian. Like Sebastian Flyte, Hugh had a dreamy, lissom beauty—



Hugh Lygon, the "real" Sebastian Flyte

blue eyes, ash-blond hair and a curly Cupid's bow of a mouth. And, like Sebastian Flyte, he was destined for misery, despite all his advantages. In his autobiography, Waugh described Hugh as "always just missing the happiness he sought, without ambition, unhappy in love, a man of great sweetness". It was this sad, tortured, gay, aristocratic soul that drew Waugh, like Flyte drew Ryder, through that "low door in the wall, which others, I knew, had found before me, which opened on an enclosed and enchanted garden".

Brought up in Golders Green, north London, the son of a middle-class publisher, Waugh was intoxicated by the cocktail of wit, class and confidence of the aristocratic Lygons. Their ancestral home for a thousand years, Madresfield Court, Worcestershire, was built in a different style to *Brideshead*—Gothic, not Baroque. But "Mad", as it was nicknamed, worked much the same magic on Waugh as *Brideshead* did on Charles Ryder. Jane Mulvagh tells the story in *Madresfield—The Real Brideshead*, published earlier

this year. The house was always full of the great and the good; among the cast were Winston Churchill's son Randolph, the novelist Nancy Mitford and the photographer Cecil Beaton.

Madresfield had been a hive of activity for so long that there are no door handles on the outside of the 12th-century front door—there has always been someone at home. Its architecture was the model for Hetton Abbey, the Gothic country house in one of Waugh's earlier novels, *A Handful of Dust*. He wrote another novel, *Black Mischief*, in the nursery at Madresfield. Many of the details in *Brideshead* are borrowed from Madresfield. When Charles visits Sebastian in his Christ Church rooms, he is peeling a green and black plover's egg—a Madresfield speciality.

Sebastian's older brother Lord *Brideshead*—like Hugh's, Lord Elmley—married an older widow and failed to produce an heir to the title and estate. And Hugh Lygon ended up following much the same comet-like trajectory as his fellow Old Etonian, Sebastian Flyte: soaring into orbit at a breakneck rate, fuelled by drink, the effect of his good looks and the bottomless family coffers, before burning out and falling to earth, extinguished before his time. Just like Sebastian, Lygon did nothing with his life but was the most electrifying company. Lygon's strange brand of hypnotic but deadly allure is caught by Anthony Blanche after the fall of Sebastian. "I warned you expressly," Blanche tells Charles Ryder, "and in great detail of the Flyte family. Charm is the great English blight. It does not exist outside these

damp islands. It spots and kills anything it touches. It kills love; it kills art."

Hugh Lygon's fall was steeper even than Sebastian's. At the end of the book, Sebastian is still alive, but bald, bearded, given to binge-drinking and living in a monastery infirmary near Carthage in Tunisia. By the age of 31, Hugh was an out-and-out alcoholic, and, if not yet an out-and-out homosexual, his predilections were known to his closest friends. Since Oxford, he had tried life as a bank clerk in Paris, as a farmer, a horse trainer and amateur jockey, but no occupation had stuck. Bankrupted in his late 20s, he had to be bailed out with a cheque from his father.

His drinking led to accidents—a fall from a horse, a face wound while out shooting and then, on August 19, 1936, there came the final tragic-comic payoff. On holiday in Bavaria, after a long drive in an open-topped car, Hugh, befuddled by drink and the heat, tripped as he stepped on to the pavement, smashing his skull on the kerb. He died three days later. His coffin was brought back home to England by Bradford, the family butler. Hugh's disgraced father, Lord Beauchamp, returned home for the funeral too, his first trip back to England since his exile in disgrace five years earlier. Hundreds of mourners came to pay tribute as Hugh Lygon was laid to rest in the churchyard next to Madresfield.

The biggest tribute to the real Sebastian Flyte, though, from his old Oxford friend, would have to wait another nine years, in one of the most remarkable novels of the 20th century.