

# The Exiled Sons of Eve: Robert Liddell's Egyptian Novels

J.V. Guérinot

Robert Liddell is an unjustly neglected Catholic novelist. Perhaps now that Peter Owen has reprinted three of his novels and promises to reprint them all, his books may at last find the audience they deserve. Lovers of Barbara Pym will remember him as Jock in *A Very Private Eye*; they met at Oxford and remained life-long friends. She greatly admired his novels. So did Ivy Compton-Burnett, Elizabeth Taylor, Francis King, and Walter Allen. But the list of his literary friends and admirers is endless: John Bayley, Fr. D'Arcy, Peter Levi, Iris Murdoch, Olivia Manning, Honor Tracy. All of this suggests that he must be worth reading, and he is.<sup>1</sup>

His best and most characteristic works are *Unreal City* (1952) and *The Rivers of Babylon* (1959) which follow Charles Harbord from 1944 to 1953 in his teaching posts in Alexandria and Cairo. They are novels of a real and quiet distinction, in the tradition that comes down from Jane Austen. Witty, often comic, highly literate and allusive, they examine with studied understatement the great themes of exile, sin, and faith.

On the most obvious level, they provide a highly entertaining account of what it was like to teach during and after the war in such foreign places as Alexandria and Cairo. Both novels are narrated in the third person, almost entirely from Charles's point of view, and through his eyes we get a vivid picture of both great cities without, however, any scene painting. (Readers of his brilliant *A Treatise on the Novel* will remember his disapproval of permitting setting to be more than suggestive.) There is none of the lavish exoticism of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* or the wearying insistence on heat and sightseeing in Olivia Manning's *The Levant Trilogy*. (Robert Liddell escaped from Greece to Egypt with Olivia Manning and her husband.) We are told just enough to make us enjoy the colourful background of Charles's exile.

As any reader will easily guess, Robert Liddell is drawing on his own experience. When war broke out, he had been occupying a temporary post in the Levant, "for he had the curious notion that it would help him to see more of life and that life was something to see

more of.<sup>22</sup> The British Authorities allowed him to work in Alexandria teaching and doing a variety of dull and irksome jobs. After the war he moved to the University of Cairo where he taught until the Suez crisis. All of these experiences are Charles's in the novel. And Charles is a Roman Catholic, like Robert Liddell, who was converted from Anglo-Catholicism at Oxford.

Robert Liddell's brother, Donald, with whom he lived in Oxford after they had both taken their degrees, was killed in the war, and the story of their childhood and youth and life together is the basis for his earlier trilogy *Kind Relations* (1939), *Stepsons* (1969), and *The Last Enchantments* (1948). After Donald's death he visited England for the last time in 1947, and chose never to return. From Cairo he moved to the University of Athens and lived in Athens until his death in 1992. (It has often been suggested that it was his permanent exile that caused him to be under-rated in Britain.)

In *Unreal City* and *The Rivers of Babylon* it is his sister whom Charles Harbord has lost; she has been killed by a bomb. They had lived happily together before the war, and now that she had left the convent which she had entered briefly, they were planning to take up their life together after the war. It is shortly after he has heard the news of Helen's death and when he is still emotionally paralyzed with grief that we first meet Charles in *Unreal City*.<sup>3</sup>

The titles *Unreal City* and *The Rivers of Babylon* direct us to the poem to keep in mind. Alexandria (called Caesarea in the novel) is, we remember, one of the unreal cities in *The Waste Land*, and the plot of the novel is the grief-benumbed Charles's friendship with Mr. Eugenides, Mr. Christo Eugenides, not a Smyrna merchant, but a famous scholar of Alexandria's past, now retired from his dull job in a bank. He would be only too pleased to offer an invitation to a weekend at the Metropole and entirely unwilling to pay for it.

The city is unreal because it is blindingly ugly, modern, and overcrowded in war time. It is unreal to Charles because he is overcome with grief at Helen's death and because he has no intention of staying there one moment longer than necessary. And it is unreal because it shares in the prevailing unreality of *The Waste Land's* falling towers, in the general collapse of religious values.

Charles's friendship with the old and disreputable Eugenides, whose companionship he comes to value in his loneliness and grief, is a remarkable study of homosexuality. (Eugenides is clearly based in part on Cavafy, of whom Robert Liddell has written a distinguished biography.) It is remarkable for its compassion and for its unspoken conviction that sex outside of marriage is sinful. It is this Christian

awareness of sin that makes the novel so different from the more celebrated novels of Gide, Proust, and Forster. "L'amour, hors du mariage, ne désireras," so Flora in *An Object for a Walk* reads in a French prayer book while bored during the sermon,<sup>4</sup> and it is entirely characteristic of Robert Liddell's habitual indirection that the moral absolute is given us not by the narrator but by a banal text which is made flatly and ironically to rhyme with "Vendredi chair ne mangeras."

Eugenides is no longer received in most circles and, good Greek that he is, is tormented by what people say about him. Part of what they say is that he likes being beaten up by taxi-drivers, but nothing so alarming happens in the novel. (We are not reading *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*.) Charles, though he has gone to the Levant to see life, is startled, and he suspects that "Jane Austen's generation might have found his outlook rather 'missish,' and even Jane Austen herself." (p. 27) If such is Eugenides' aberration, Charles decides that though he could hardly approve, he does not really mind. He would not on that account refuse to like him. His judgment is candid, in Jane Austen's sense of the word: "If it made him less good, it need not make him less nice—and while it remained a private vice, one could forget it." (p. 27) It is behaviour less sensational and less private that comes to concern Charles.

One evening, tired of his researches into third century undertakers in Alexandria, Eugenides takes Charles to a homosexual bar. Our attitude to the bar is elaborately qualified. On entering, Eugenides quotes "per me si va tra la perduta gente," (p.81) but this seems a melodramatic pose on his part. The inhabitants are scarcely Dantesque: an American lieutenant; the almost indistinguishable young men Lucien, Camille, and Victor whom Charles keeps meeting at parties; "the creature called Pauline" (an untypically harsh note). (p. 84)

His funniest use of Jane Austen helps further to complicate our response. "'We've been here for ages,' said Lucien, as who should say: 'My dearest creature, what can have made you so late? I have been waiting for you at least this age.'" (p. 92) Who would want it said of him that he sounded like Isabella Thorpe? Her voice in the bar suggests that Lucien-Camille-Victor are guilty not so much of the sins of Dante's circle of the lustful as they are of the less striking sins of silliness, affectation, lying, and heartlessness.

And there is a further analogy. The bar seems to Charles to have the remoteness and unreality of the pastoral world. Mentally he equips Camille and the rest with crooks and flocks of sheep. The bar is more innocent than its talk, for surely nothing ever happens in it. It is an odd image; the bar is hardly a *locus amoenus*. And yet one sees the point: just so does Corydon burn always for Alexis. It is impossible to imagine

Virgil's lovelorn shepherds doing anything but sing.

But Dante and Virgil and Jane Austen are not fully adequate guides. "In the bar, the comforting mirage of crooks and flocks and purling streams had suddenly vanished, on more than one occasion, before the sight of real, hard evil in a face." (p. 142) The bar is a bad place to be in, a *mauvais lieu*, an occasion of sin.

Charles has been at a pretentious *conversazione* where an odious young man was dividing up writers into *copains* and *salauds*. The case of Proust he found difficult. In fifteen years Proust may perhaps be quite readable again, he announced to people who did "not at all look as if they had read Proust once." (p.141) And the chorus of voices decided he was a *salaud*. "The stupid irreverence caused Charles to feel the faint nausea he sometimes felt at Thérèse's bar." (p. 142) The resemblance of which he is viscerally aware is enlightening. The young man had been debasing a great work of art. What he was doing is evil. And the bar's inhabitants are likewise debasing what is good.

The final evaluation of the bar is an unequivocal condemnation which is still conveyed obliquely. It is a sentence Charles remembers from *The Imitation of Christ*, but the sentence is a question, and its source is suppressed: "Why should you want to look at that which it is not lawful for you to have?" (p. 111)

It is the question that hovers unspoken over Eugenides' sad story. At the bar he sees a Canadian Air Force corporal "of almost god-like beauty" (p.87) whom he and Charles think looks like Hadrian's Antinous. Eugenides is lucky enough to find him again several weeks later and falls in love with him. It is a quite innocent but most unsuitable friendship. Charles knew that he had "a tendency to be missish, but he intended to avoid being governessy." (p.135) Eugenides can only hurt himself, and what he is trying to win is "well worth winning—the happiness a close human relationship can add to life." (p. 135)

Antinous's name is Jim. He is large and heavy and slow, and he sits happily with Eugenides beautifully mending his socks. He is calm and quiet and has a real affection for Eugenides. Together in domesticated happiness, with the wireless on, "They were happy, as people so seldom are, and as they hardly can be unless they are also rather good." (p. 155) What else, Charles wonders, is there for Eugenides but an unsuitable friendship?

Poor Eugenides' situation is both comic and pathetic. The conversation of the totally uneducated is, Eugenides admits, very tedious. He cannot mention the Goncourts or Julian the Apostate. He has painfully to explain who Antinous was. Jim is, in short, as readers of *A Treatise on the Novel* will recognize, that overly praised figure,

among whom Charles would never choose his friends, The Noble Savage. Not all that noble, since noble savages never are. He is apt to get drunk, and one terrible night at the bar he insults and exposes Eugenides, his snobbery, his petty economies, his impotence. He disappears and is badly missed.

Eugenides states his problem poignantly: "You see, I can't go out into the square, and find someone now, and bring him back, and just sit in a chair opposite him, and *love him!*" (p. 183) As he had probably done with Jim, Charles thinks.

But Jim does return to Eugenides who forgives him, and Charles finds them sitting together, Jim darning socks, Eugenides with a look of perfect happiness on his face. One does not see how the affair could end other than it does. Jim is killed in an auto accident, and though Eugenides bears it bravely, he finally admits he is ill, is operated on, and dies.

With these deaths *Unreal City* quietly and unobtrusively becomes a novel of Christian faith. Jim dies in Holy Week, and Alexandria, we are told, is near enough to the Holy Land "for the shadow of the Cross to hang heavy." (p.215) When Charles grieves over his inability to comfort Eugenides who has just learned of Jim's death, he remembers "the three terrible words of Pascal," "Je mourrai seul." "There was only one death in all history in which we could share." (p. 213)

On Good Friday he returns from church "purged by pity and fear, and more ready (he hoped) to take his place in a lesser tragedy." (p. 215) We are asked to see the shadow of the Cross falling across Eugenides' tragically disoriented love. When he dies his servant uses "the lovely and comforting Greek word for death." "The Paraffendi has been pardoned." (p. 233)

The *Stabat Mater*, that great call to weep because another wept, sounds repeatedly. Stepping into San Luigi one afternoon because it was Lent, Charles hears,

Eia, mater, fons amoris  
Me sentire vim doloris  
Fac ut tecum lugeam. (p.173)

And while Camille is pointing out to him a handsome sergeant, he hears priest and people sing as they make the Stations of the Cross,

Santa Madre, deh! voi fate  
Che le piaghe del Signore  
Siano impresse nel mio cuore. (p.173)

Later, looking for news of Jim's accident, he goes in again and again hears the prayer as the old priest shuffles round the stations. Charles must open himself up to the mystery of saving love revealed on the Cross and to the grief of others. He feels touched and reproved and resolves again "to be more tender to other people's sufferings, less selfishly immersed in his own." (p.173)

It is Charles's love for Eugenides that helps him out of his isolation and self-pity. It is not easy to love Eugenides. One has to admire Charles's concern for the old man because he is a very trying friend. He has the capacity to bore Charles painfully almost every time they meet, he is peevish, paranoid, jealous, exacting, fond of quarrelling, given to insane outbursts of Greek nationalism, and, a minor flaw but one most unnerving to the reader, always criticizing Charles for not picking the bones of his meat and fish properly.

But Charles succeeds and knows that he will love other people again. He is no longer trapped in the unreal city. On the day the war ends and he knows he can leave Alexandria which, however hideous, deserved his gratitude because it gave him Christo and his friendship, he thinks of Eugenides and passes his final, tender, and illuminating judgment: "If he had ended as an old man, rather disreputable, with an odd, undignified, and what some people would call a perverted love for his only comfort—ought one not to remember with sympathy that it was of love that it was a perversion?" (p.237)

## II

*The Rivers of Babylon* is a comic novel of manners that is an extended reflection on the epigraph from Pascal which reads in part, "Les fleuves de Babylone coulent et tombent et entraînent. Il faut s'asseoir sur les fleuves, non sous ou dedans, mais dessus; et non debout, mais assis: pour être humble, étant assis, et en sûreté, étant dessus. Mais nous serons debout dans les porches de Hiérusalem.

Qu'on voie si ce plaisir est stable ou coulant: s'il passe, c'est un fleuve de Babylone." (*Pensées*, 697, ed. Chevalier; 85, ed. Brunschvicg)

It is his richest and funniest novel. Charles has had himself transferred from Alexandria to Cairo where he has a post teaching English in the University. Although his grief for Helen is as real as ever, he is happy in his life in Cairo and has learned to care for other people. Indeed, he feels that he has perhaps come to depend on them too much. Through his eyes we are introduced to a variety of comic characters he sees at luncheon or dinner, at parties, in bars, at the University, on picnics, at the Zoo, while visiting mosques. They are all plunged in the waters of Babylon which flow and fall: old Sir James Blagge and his

sister; her companion Philippa Carswell, who looks like the daughter of a High Church clergyman and who in the course of the novel embraces Islam, has a baby by a gigantic Nubian policeman she meets in a traffic jam, becomes an Anglican nun, and contemplates becoming a Jew; the bogus American Schreiber P. Gillum, who is studying Arianism and whose instructors in Arabic are native boys who swim naked nightly in his pool; Rashwan, a dreadful and pushing colleague with a Ph.D. from Wolverhampton who when asked by a student about Marianne Dashwood thinks she must be another novelist and gives a little lecture upon her work; Simon Archdale, who has just come out from England, is interested only in abstractions and causes, would not be found dead with an Angela Thirkell, and is painfully anxious to get on; and Professor Llewellyn Lane, the head of Charles's department and a distinguished scholar who has become a Moslem.

Charles makes a most attractive central character, amused and amusing. He is a shy and reticent young man, and Robert Liddell, who believes that fictional characters have rights, respects his reticence. He is like his friend Fabian who "loved experience, and, very sensibly, preferred it to be vicarious."<sup>3</sup> He has a somewhat surprising ideal. He means to be "a nice English maiden gentleman. . . .It doesn't sound very splendid, but how good it can be!" (*An Object for a Walk*, p. 180)

The reader does, indeed, in the course of the novel, discover how good such a life can be, although Charles suffers the occasional twinge of envy. Seeing a cab in Cairo one night full of singing young Italians he thinks, "Obviously they were having a much more amusing party than any he could expect." But he instantly reminds himself, "He would not, indeed, be likely to enjoy youthful lower-middle-class Italian life any more than international Cairo society—he was even less well equipped to enjoy it: the difference was that he felt he would like to enjoy it." (p.21)

He has learned to accept his limitations and find happiness within them. He behaves with admirable calm and courage when Cairo turns violent, but he takes a characteristically modest view of his bravery. He feels only that he can endure most things. "He liked to think that in a time of persecution he might have earned a nameless place in the kalendar among the 'companions' of a notable martyr." (p.267)

It is all a highly entertaining picture of what it must have been like to teach English at the University of Cairo in the early '50's. Charles and Llewellyn are there partly because neither Oxford nor Cambridge has offered them a position, partly because they enjoy the leisure for their own work their jobs allow them, partly because they have lived abroad so long they have little wish to return to an England they would

hardly recognize. The University library is good, and they have long summer holidays that allow Charles to visit his beloved Greece. They have a pleasant social life in international Cairo society and have some good Egyptian friends. It is a way of life that is civilized and gentle. All of this compensates for the academic deficiencies of the university.

Here the novel almost spills over into farce. The English classes are of such a peculiar dreadfulness that they are a joy to read about. Most students never bother to read the set texts at all and rely on student notes that read like wild parodies of lectures. All that one can do is to interest the one or two bright students who may be in the class. Charles has a brilliant student who loves Henry James. He commits suicide instead of sitting for his examinations because if he gets a degree his rapacious family will all try to live off him.

Each year the standards are lowered. If one asked them examination questions, Llewellyn tells Charles, that bore any relation to their knowledge, one would ask, “‘What (if anything) do you know of. . .’ or ‘What (in your worthless opinion) is. . .’” (p.167) The invigilation scenes are splendid with the invigilators kept busy supplying querulous students with aspirin and Coca Cola.

But the novel, as the epigraph suggests, is about exile. Charles and Llewellyn are literally exiles: they have chosen to live out of their native country. Their sense of exile is slowly heightened by the approaching Suez crisis. The unrest at the University grows more serious; classes are suspended. No one can be sure whether he will be able to keep his job, or will even be able to remain in Cairo. The illiterate Rashwan is clearly about to take over the English department. Finally the non-Egyptian members of the department are dismissed. There is a dreadful riot in the city. Simon, with a reluctantly-borrowed novel of Angela Thirkell in his pocket, is crushed to death. Llewellyn decides to leave Egypt, which he has loved so much, and return to England. Charles, having no place he would rather be, elects to stay.

Both men realize they are not only exiles geographically; they are spiritual exiles, as are we all, the exiled sons of Eve, as the *Salve Regina* has it, from which Eliot borrowed for *Ash Wednesday*. Cairo, too, is an unreal city, as the echo of *The Waste Land* in the novel's title suggests. Charles and Llewellyn know that here we have no abiding city, that nothing is stable, the rivers of Babylon flow, we are strangers and pilgrims.

The question, of course, is how we are to spend our spiritual exile. When Christians know that we are here in banishment, why, Charles wonders, “should we ever be violently nationalistic about our places of exile? I don't suppose the Jews were Babylonian imperialists.” (p.179)



When he hears the students chanting their nationalistic song, "My country, my country," he remembers that "is what the evil spirits and sinful inclinations inside us call the human soul—according to St. François de Sales." (p. 236)

But History is now making things even harder. Charles and Llewelyn feel that they are living in a new Dark Age, though one without faith, an age in which one should simply try to be a survivor, and not to move with the times. They admire those splendid survivors of the Decline and Fall, those exemplary exiles, Cassiodorus and Sidonius Apollinaris.

There are other images of exile. Charles, obliged to work up his Anglo-Saxon, is haunted by the hopeless figure of the Solitary, stirring the frost-cold sea with his hands, traversing the path of exile. But there is another, more comforting image. An old priest tells him to think of those other wanderers, *les rois mages*: "Voyez, ils n'avaient ni avion ni wagon-lit . . . mais ils se donnaient de la peine." (p. 270) Llewelyn decides to follow them. Charles finds him in church kneeling before the tawdry Christmas crib. For him Egypt has ceased to exist, and he can no longer remain a Moslem. He is coming back to Christianity and knows the long journey he will have. "A hard coming I shall have of it," he says. (p. 271) And as he looks at the Christian's God amid the tinsel and the artificial flowers, he says with Pascal, "Truly a hidden God." (p.271)

For Charles amid the uncertain pleasures of Cairo, things are less straightforward. He knows he cannot end his exile by returning to England and that he must confront the waters of Babylon where he is at the moment.

He hears barrel organs at street corners playing "La Seine":

Elle coucoule, coule, coule, dès qu'elle  
entre dans Paris;

Elle s'enroule, roule, roule, autour de  
ses quais fleuris,

and thinks, "Les fleuves de Babylone coulent et tombent, et entraînent." (p. 262) The use of the trivial popular song about another city famed for pleasure to suggest the Pascalian theme is a striking example of the way the novel suggests the religious dimension without any break in the surface realism or any awkward jarring of tone.

But Robert Liddell goes further. He invents a scene which is perfectly realistic and consistent and yet which turns Pascal's metaphors into objects of everyday Egyptian life. Charles is alone at Aswan for several days at the novel's close. He idles on the Nile and looks at those

waters of Babylon. It would be dreadful to be in them, threatened by drowning, and “dreadful again, and futile to try to bestride those waters, to stand commandingly upon them, as so many people had been foolish enough to attempt in the course of their long and unfortunate history.” (p. 279) And Charles, as the Nile runs sunlit between golden sands, sits in a felucca upon the waters of Babylon. We remember the posture Pascal prescribes for the exile: “Il faut s’asseoir sur les fleuves, non sous ou dedans mais dessus; et non debout, mais assis, et en sûreté, étant dessus.”

Charles is learning those wonderful virtues, detachment and resignation. If he must, he now knows that he can leave the sun and sweetness of Egypt and begin his life in another place. If his old life is torn away, somehow he can make a new one. “What did it matter, so long as at last, saved from the waters of Babylon, he stood (as Llewellyn seemed to be preparing to stand) in the porches of Jerusalem?” (p. 280)

- 1 Robert Liddell wrote over twenty books. The place of publication is always London unless otherwise noted. *The Almond Tree* (Jonathan Cape, 1938), *Kind Relations* (Jonathan Cape, 1939), *The Gantillons* (Jonathan Cape, 1940), *Watering-Place* (Jonathan Cape, 1945) (short stories), *The Last Enchantments* (Jonathan Cape, 1948) republished, Peter Owen, 1991, *Unreal City* (Jonathan Cape, 1952) republished Peter Owen, 1993, *The Rivers of Babylon* (Jonathan Cape, 1959), *An Object for a Walk* (Longmans, 1966), *The Deep End* (Longmans, 1968), *Stepsons* (Longmans, 1969) republished Peter Owen, 1992, *The Aunts* (Peter Owen, 1987); Ferdinand Fabre, *The Abbé Tigrane*, translated by Robert Liddell (Peter Owen, 1988), *The Novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett* (Gollancz, 1955), *The Novels of Jane Austen* (Longmans, 1963), *The Novels of George Eliot* (Duckworth, 1977), *A Mind at Ease: Barbara Pym and her Novels* (Peter Owen, 1989), *Twin Spirits: The Novels of Emily and Anne Bronte* (Peter Owen, 1990); *A Treatise on the Novel* (Jonathan Cape, 1947), *Some Principles of Fiction* (Jonathan Cape, 1953); *Aegean Greece* (Jonathan Cape, 1954), *Byzantium and Istanbul* (Jonathan Cape, 1956), *The Morea* (Jonathan Cape, 1968), *Mainland Greece* (Longmans, 1965); *Cavafy: A Critical Biography* (Duckworth, 1974), *Elizabeth and Ivy* (Peter Owen, 1986); Gwyn Williams, *Flying in Egypt: The Story of a Verse War, 1943-45* (Port Talbot, West Glamorgan, Alun Books, 1991) (contributions in light verse.)
- 2 *Unreal City* (Jonathan Cape, 1952), p. 19. All further references to this work will be given parenthetically by page numbers in the text.
- 3 In 1966 Robert Liddell added *An Object for a Walk* to connect the three English and two Egyptian novels, but he later decided it was a mistake, so he wrote me, and it must be admitted that the novel is inferior to *Unreal City* and *The Rivers of Babylon*. Diffuse and straying at times beyond his range, it is of interest largely, despite its fine and very funny last section, for what it tells us about Charles, first at Oxford and then while he works one summer in a refugee camp near Gaza.
- 4 *An Object for a Walk* (Longmans, 1966), p. 7.
- 5 *The Rivers of Babylon* (Jonathan Cape, 1959), p. 218. All further references to this work will be given parenthetically by page numbers in the text.