Foreword

I was five when my grandfather died, and the only clear memory I have of him is an image of his big bald head and the strange dent in it. The story of how he got that dent used to give me a curious thrill. It still does. It's a tale of the surprise of survival, and also a kind of family creation myth. Eric's cranial cavity had been carved out in 1918 by what he liked to call a 'very disappointed' German bullet. It hit him straight in the back of the head, but was deflected just sufficiently upwards by the tin of his Tommy helmet to fizz round the inside and out the front, searing the top of his skull as it went. After Eric's death in 1974, his widow – my grandmother, Marjorie – moved back to the Orkney islands where he had come from and kept the helmet in her library. My brother and I used to put it on, imagining how our grandfather must have felt being shot. There was a smooth round hole at the back where the bullet had gone in, and a jagged one opposite, where it had come out. The first literary conceit I understood was the title of Eric's last autobiography: *Fanfare for a Tin Hat*.

He had gone to fight as a 17-year-old private, lying about his age, desperate to prove himself, striving to satisfy an island boy's romantic longings. The shock of the trenches did not cure him of such desires so much as complicate them. 'The first chapter of my military service had a ludicrous beginning,' he once wrote, 'and a conclusion in pure farce.' He viewed the spectacle of himself being wounded – leaping unnaturally high into the air like a writhing, shot rabbit – as a grotesque joke. Eric never reduced the soldier's experience to a moral formula. It would always be, for him, a pagan confection of contradictory impulses, an unholy rite mixing pain and exhilaration, cowardice and heroism, romanticism and cruelty, horror and comedy. It was, however, the comic mode that he cherished most in his writing about war, and which best

captured his own fierce exultation in remaining ridiculously and improbably alive.

Returning home, he studied medicine at Aberdeen university, became a journalist in India, and wrote two novels in his 20s which he considered to be useful throat-clearing exercises. But what he longed for most at the time was an adventure in a country that could take him beyond the realm of empire and European culture; and he got it in the form of a travel scholarship to what he called the 'vast morning of America.' He arrived in 1929 with the maniacal energy of prohibition in full swing, not long before the Wall Street crash and the onset of the great depression.

The novel Eric wrote while he was there is set in the year before the crash, a period in which the United States had emerged as a great power but was still sufficiently unfamiliar to British eyes to be truly astonishing. And the character he devised to be his unreliable explorer was one capable of absorbing the enormity and variety of the American experience without being overwhelmed by its incongruities. He chose a blithe, bastard descendent of Byron's Don Juan (pronounced Joo-an); 'a singularly clear-sighted youngster with a keen perception for the grotesque and ridiculous'; a lover who is captured by women rather than seducing them; a hero who stumbles unheroically from one event to the next in a sequence of unlikely accidents; a mixture of dirt and deity whose response when faced with either sudden catastrophe or miraculous survival is to laugh.

Juan in America is a novel in the mode of the picaresque – the literary form designed to mimic the arbitrary accidents and adventures of existence. It's a story of erotic discovery in the sense, as Juan puts it, that 'your trousers hide not only your nakedness but your kinship to the clown.' It was Eric's first major book, and he described writing it 'in a state of penal excitement that naturally I concealed from those about me.'

Juan similarly conceals the intensity of his experience by appearing unattached in a country that allows him to travel from state to state, evading consequences as he goes. On his first day, he falls for the daughter of a gangster, witnesses a murder in a speakeasy and watches a woman leap to her death in a New York street. He thrills to the bizarreness of each spectacle and moves on to the next in a galloping mood that is part medieval romance, part running commentary on 1920s America. This sets the pace and tone for the rest of the novel. 'What happened yesterday will not affect me tomorrow,' he rejoices. 'I am a free man – or very nearly free.' In one glorious scene, Juan is dragged into a Carolina river by a mule, and survives by riding it through the floodwaters, aware that he and his floating mount share a Quixotic bond: 'There was much to be said for a mule, that took neither after its Tory father the horse nor its Christian mother the ass, but lived its own life, wild and illegitimate and unhampered by progeny.'

This is certainly not a book about war, and it was written more than ten years after Eric came back from the trenches, but in almost every episode there is a variation on the theme of Juan preposterously evading death, disgrace or disaster. Ejected from an aeroplane over Nevada, he breathes cloud through his nose and farts into a storm as he parachutes earthwards:

> He shouted, and the sound of his voice was so small, so tiny and gnat-like a whimper after the thunder, that he laughed again, shaking in his harness, to think that he, an atom vulnerable at all points, a thing of fragile bones, a coil of guts and two quarts of blood packed in a tenuous envelope of skin, should ride the air and – if he cared to – break wind against thunder in its native place.

The exuberance of Eric in comic mode feels to me like a style

forged in a complicated reaction to cheating death. The book made his name in the 1930s, and it is rightly reprinted here as a classic evocation of prohibition America. But its lasting quality lies, I think, in the concealed meaning of Juan's escapism.

Eric's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren all have reason to be grateful to his tin hat and his thick, Orcadian skull. And so perhaps does the rest of his progeny: twenty four novels, four collections of short stories, three autobiographies, nine works of history and biography, six plays, a collection of poetry, three childrens' books, and several volumes of essays and journalism. Some of his novels – *The Men of Ness*, *Private Angelo*, *The Dark of Summer* – have stood the test of time as successfully as *Juan in America*, and may be more mature works. But it was in Juan that Eric discovered himself and found that he could say something unique among a generation of British writers to have emerged from the First World War.

Alexander Linklater
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