



Howard, Brian (1905-1958)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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As a flamboyant schoolboy aesthete, Brian Howard seemed destined to make his mark, if perhaps a dubious one, in the cultural world of Modernist Britain. But while Howard was most adept at creating personal facades, he failed to produce any lasting work, drifted aimlessly through life, and ended tragically.

As a result, he is notable for being a most extraordinary failure, remembered mostly as an interesting secondary figure among the "Brideshead Generation," the mostly homosexual "Bright Young Things" of Oxford in the 1920s.

Brian Christian de Claibourne Howard was born in Surrey, England, to American émigré parents. Although the truth is uncertain, Howard maintained that his father, Francis Gassaway Howard, was of Jewish origins, and thus Howard was himself frequently assumed to be Jewish, however mistakenly.

What is certain is that his father, an entrepreneur from Washington, D.C., was more absent than present in his son's life, and the boy was raised by his indulgent and socially pretentious mother, a "Southern belle" who had inherited a modest fortune.

The cherubic-looking Howard was sent to Eton, where he soon became known to his classmates as an artistic (if affected) innovator, and as a self-absorbed and precocious rebel to his schoolmasters. While there, he befriended a classmate, Harold Acton, a boy of similar disposition who would later eclipse him in artistic and literary endeavors.

The two founded the Eton Society of Arts, a group whose members included such future literary figures as Cyril Connolly, Anthony Powell, and Henry Greene. Howard also edited a literary magazine, the *Eton Candle* (1922), which included contributions from many of his contemporaries.

At this point in his life, Howard seemed destined for a brilliant career in the arts, and he planned to carry on his Eton activities on a grander scale with Acton at Oxford. Acton easily passed his entrance examinations, but Howard, an undisciplined student, did not. Although he passed (by cheating) the following year, by the time he arrived at Oxford's Christ Church in 1923, he had been overshadowed by his former protégé.

At Oxford, Howard was mostly known for his socializing and for flaunting his homosexuality. He was, for a time, a friend of Evelyn Waugh, who later based a number of his less attractive homosexual (and Jewish) characters on his erstwhile companion.

Howard left Oxford in 1927, after two attempts to pass his final examinations, and subsequently drifted from one London party to another for a few years. For most of the 1930s, he lived on his mother's money and traveled aimlessly through Europe with a German boyfriend identified only as "Toni" (as did Sebastian Flyte in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*), and he was on the fringes of the Christopher Isherwood-W. H. Auden circle in Berlin.

While his former classmates embarked on notable literary careers, Howard remained unpublished and unproductive. When Toni was detained as a hostile alien in France at the beginning of World War II, Howard returned to England where, amazingly, he was commissioned as an officer in MI5, the British counterintelligence agency. In 1943, he was dismissed from MI5 for numerous indiscretions, and he spent the rest of the war as a low-ranking aircraftsman in the Royal Air Force, frequently in trouble for such infractions as losing his uniform in a public lavatory.

At forty, Howard was a failed artist. Alcoholic, financially dependent on his mother, and in poor health, he had produced no poetry or fiction since his undergraduate years. After the war, he resumed his life of drifting, this time in the company of a muscular young Irishman.

In January 1958, his lover died of asphyxiation from a faulty gas heater. Howard, blaming himself for this accident, committed suicide with an overdose of the sedatives to which he had become addicted, thus bringing a life of unfulfilled promise to an end.

Howard has lived on, however ironically, as the inspiration for any number of grotesque minor characters ("aesthetic buggers," as Waugh put it) in works of the schoolmates who had once admired him.

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