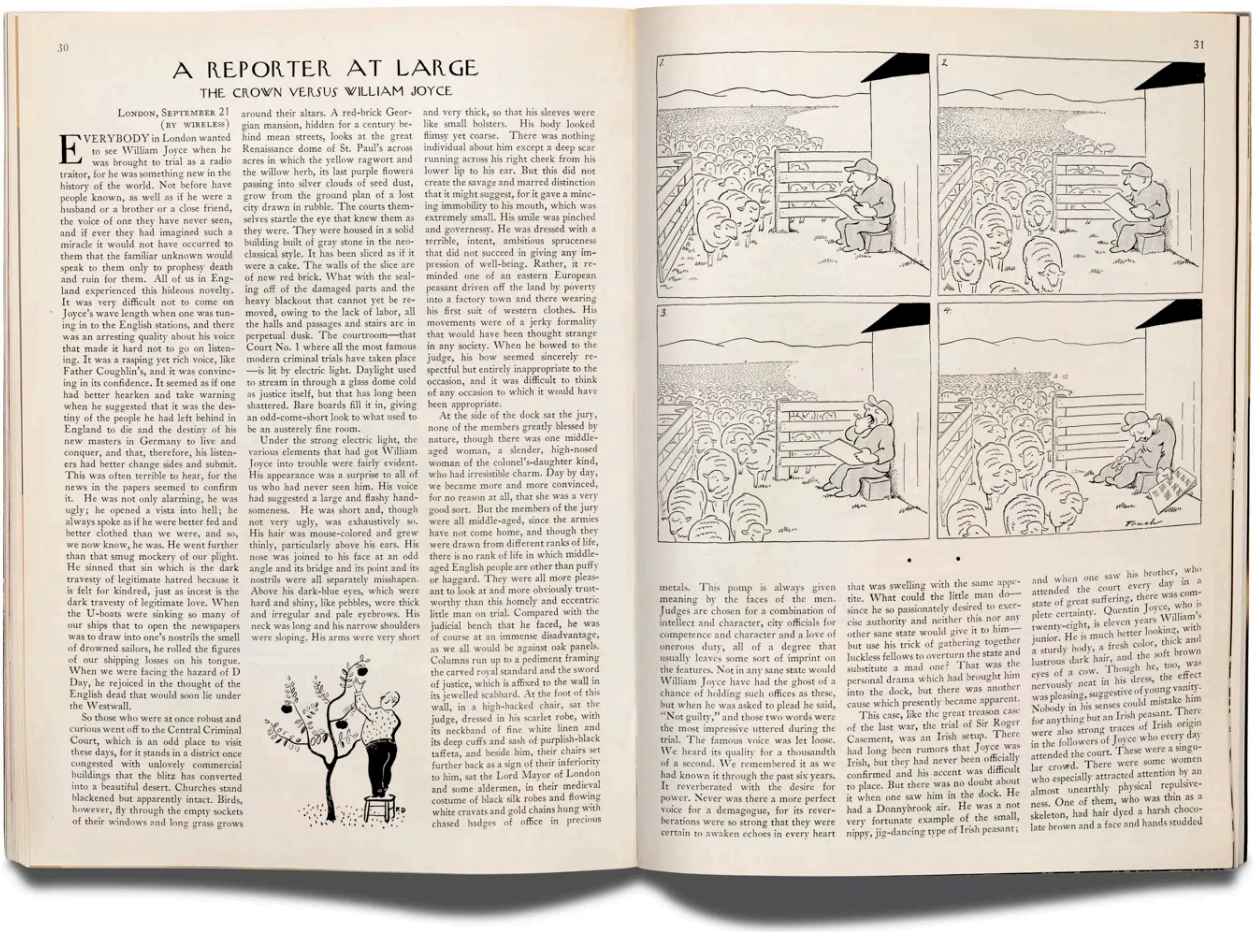
TAKES

GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS ON REBECCA WEST'S "THE CROWN VERSUS WILLIAM JOYCE"

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

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30

A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE CROWN VERSUS WILLIAM JOYCE

LONDON, SEPTEMBER 21 (BY WIRELESS)

EVERYBODY in London wanted to see William Joyce when he was brought to trial as a radio traitor, for he was something new in the history of the world. Not before have people known, as well as if he were a husband or a brother or a close friend, the voice of one they have never seen, and if ever they had imagined such a miracle it would not have occurred to them that the familiar unknown would speak to them only to prophesy death and ruin for them. All of us in England experienced this hideous novelty. It was very difficult not to come on Joyce's wave length when one was tuning in to the English stations, and there was an arresting quality about his voice that made it hard not to go on listening. It was a rasping yet rich voice, like Father Coughlin's, and it was convincing in its confidence. It seemed as if one had better hearken and take warning when he suggested that it was the destiny of the people he had left behind in England to die and the destiny of his new masters in Germany to live and conquer, and that, therefore, his listeners had better change sides and submit. This was often terrible to hear, for the news in the papers seemed to confirm it. He was not only alarming, he was ugly; he opened a vista into hell; he always spoke as if he were better fed and better clothed than we were, and so, we now know, he was. He went further than that smug mockery of our plight. He sinned that sin which is the dark travesty of legitimate hatred because it is felt for kindred, just as incest is the dark travesty of legitimate love. When the U-boats were sinking so many of our ships that to open the newspapers was to draw into one's nostrils the smell of drowned sailors, he rolled the figures of our shipping losses on his tongue. When we were facing the hazard of D Day, he rejoiced in the thought of the English dead that would soon lie under the Westwall.

So those who were at once robust and curious went off to the Central Criminal Court, which is an odd place to visit these days, for it stands in a district once congested with unlovely commercial buildings that the blitz has converted into a beautiful desert. Churches stand blackened but apparently intact. Birds, however, fly through the empty sockets of their windows and long grass grows around their altars. A red-brick Georgian mansion, hidden for a century behind mean streets, looks at the great Renaissance dome of St. Paul's across acres in which the yellow ragwort and the willow herb, its last purple flowers passing into silver clouds of seed dust, grow from the ground plan of a lost city drawn in rubble. The courts themselves startle the eye that knew them as they were. They were housed in a solid building built of gray stone in the neo-classical style. It has been sliced as if it were a cake. The walls of the slice are of new red brick. What with the sealing off of the damaged parts and the heavy blackout that cannot yet be removed, owing to the lack of labor, all the halls and passages and stairs are in perpetual dusk. The courtroom—that Court No. 1 where all the most famous modern criminal trials have taken place—is lit by electric light. Daylight used to stream in through a glass dome cold as justice itself, but that has long been shattered. Bare boards fill it in, giving an odd-come-short look to what used to be an austerely fine room.

Under the strong electric light, the various elements that had got William Joyce into trouble were fairly evident. His appearance was a surprise to all of us who had never seen him. His voice had suggested a large and flashy handsomeness. He was short and, though not very ugly, was exhaustively so. His hair was mouse-colored and grew thinly, particularly above his ears. His nose was joined to his face at an odd angle and its bridge and its point and its nostrils were all separately misshapen. Above his dark-blue eyes, which were hard and shiny, like pebbles, were thick and irregular and pale eyebrows. His neck was long and his narrow shoulders were sloping. His arms were very short and very thick, so that his sleeves were like small bolsters. His body looked flimsy yet coarse. There was nothing individual about him except a deep scar running across his right cheek from his lower lip to his ear. But this did not create the savage and marred distinction that it might suggest, for it gave a mincing immobility to his mouth, which was extremely small. His smile was pinched and governessy. He was dressed with a terrible, intent, ambitious spruceness that did not succeed in giving any impression of well-being. Rather, it reminded one of an eastern European peasant driven off the land by poverty into a factory town and there wearing his first suit of western clothes. His movements were of a jerky formality that would have been thought strange in any society. When he bowed to the judge, his bow seemed sincerely respectful but entirely inappropriate to the occasion, and it was difficult to think of any occasion to which it would have been appropriate.

At the side of the dock sat the jury, none of the members greatly blessed by nature, though there was one middle-aged woman, a slender, high-nosed woman of the colonel's-daughter kind, who had irresistible charm. Day by day, we became more and more convinced, for no reason at all, that she was a very good sort. But the members of the jury were all middle-aged, since the armies have not come home, and though they were drawn from different ranks of life, there is no rank of life in which middle-aged English people are other than puffy or haggard. They were all more pleasant to look at and more obviously trustworthy than this homely and eccentric little man on trial. Compared with the judicial bench that he faced, he was of course at an immense disadvantage, as we all would be against oak panels. Columns run up to a pediment framing the carved royal standard and the sword of justice, which is affixed to the wall in its jewelled scabbard. At the foot of this wall, in a high-backed chair, sat the judge, dressed in his scarlet robe, with its neckband of fine white linen and its deep cuffs and sash of purplish-black taffeta, and beside him, their chairs set further back as a sign of their inferiority to him, sat the Lord Mayor of London and some aldermen, in their medieval costume of black silk robes and flowing white cravats and gold chains hung with chased badges of office in precious metals. This pomp is always given meaning by the faces of the men. Judges are chosen for a combination of intellect and character, city officials for competence and character and a love of onerous duty, all of a degree that usually leaves some sort of imprint on the features. Not in any sane state would William Joyce have had the ghost of a chance of holding such offices as these, but when he was asked to plead he said, "Not guilty," and those two words were the most impressive uttered during the trial. The famous voice was let loose. We heard its quality for a thousandth of a second. We remembered it as we had known it through the past six years. It reverberated with the desire for power. Never was there a more perfect voice for a demagogue, for its reverberations were so strong that they were certain to awaken echoes in every heart that was swelling with the same appetite. What could the little man do—since he so passionately desired to exercise authority and neither this nor any other sane state would give it to him—but use his trick of gathering together luckless fellows to overturn the state and substitute a mad one? That was the personal drama which had brought him into the dock, but there was another cause which presently became apparent.

This case, like the great treason case of the last war, the trial of Sir Roger Casement, was an Irish setup. There had long been rumors that Joyce was Irish, but they had never been officially confirmed and his accent was difficult to place. But there was no doubt about it when one saw him in the dock. He had a Donnybrook air. He was a not very fortunate example of the small, nippy, jig-dancing type of Irish peasant; and when one saw his brother, who attended the court every day in a state of great suffering, there was complete certainty. Quentin Joyce, who is twenty-eight, is eleven years William's junior. He is much better looking, with a sturdy body, a fresh color, thick and lustrous dark hair, and the soft brown eyes of a cow. Though he, too, was nervously neat in his dress, the effect was pleasing, suggestive of young vanity. Nobody in his senses could mistake him for anything but an Irish peasant. There were also strong traces of Irish origin in the followers of Joyce who every day attended the court. These were a singular crowd. There were some women who especially attracted attention by an almost unearthly physical repulsiveness. One of them, who was thin as a skeleton, had hair dyed a harsh chocolate brown and a face and hands studded

31

September 29, 1945

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The badge of maturity, for a literary genre, is the anxiety of influence—the compulsion felt by an aspiring writer to pee upon a fire hydrant that an earlier eminence once peed upon with distinction. Rebecca West, an unjustly neglected deity of "novelistic" reportage, would have approved of the vulgarity of this metaphor. In the 1941 masterpiece "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon," where she micturated upon the fire hydrant of Yugoslavia for eleven hundred gloriously digressive pages, a "lavatory of the old Turkish kind" inspires an extended rumination on its dark dung hole.

The *New Yorker* writer Janet Malcolm, one of West's greatest heirs, would never have dwelled on such crude terrain. But many of Malcolm's preoccupations were recognizable as attempts to overcome the debt that she owed her precursor. Legal conflicts—like the one at the heart of Malcolm's "The Journalist and the Murderer"—make for a good example. West, who combined a psychoanalytic aversion to sentimentality with an anthropological curiosity, inspired a generation of writers to render courtroom proceedings as a civilized translation of a primordial rite. In 1946, her dispatch from Nuremberg began, "Those men who had wanted to kill me and my kind and who had nearly had their wish were to be told whether I and my kind were to kill them and why." Vengeance might have underwritten a given trial's stakes, but cases themselves were to be taken in as stylized performances. West treated trial coverage as a variant of drama criticism.

West reserved her most operatic appreciation for tragedies of betrayal—"the dark travesty of legitimate hatred because it is felt for kindred, just as incest is the dark travesty of legitimate love." A year before Nuremberg, West chronicled the prosecution, in London, of William Joyce, alias Lord Haw-Haw. Joyce was a second-tier Fascist who had defected to Berlin to serve as a radio broadcaster for the Nazis' English service. He was infamous in Britain for his bloodthirsty prophecies of German triumph.

The courthouse audience's vexed relationship with Joyce was "something new in the history of the world"—a prototype of the parasocial. Joyce's voice "had suggested a large and flashy handsomeness," but his appearance broke the spell. "He was short and, though not very ugly, was exhaustively so," with the look "of an eastern European peasant driven off the land by poverty into a factory town and there wearing his first suit of western clothes." (Outdoing Malcolm in her icy dispassion, West was merciless with the poor jurors as well: "though they were drawn from different ranks of life, there is no rank of life in which middle-aged English people are other than puffy or haggard.")

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What ought to be West's considerable legacy has been reduced to her wit, and she was hilariously unsparing in her treatment of Joyce as "flimsy yet coarse." This, West was well aware, represented a crystallization of the attitude that inspired his original treason. Joyce's youthful high-society aspirations had been dismissed, and the pain of this injury fed his populist resentment: "What could the little man do—since he so passionately desired to exercise authority and neither this nor any other sane state would give it to him—but use his trick of gathering together luckless fellows to overturn the state and substitute a mad one?"

Rejected by the smart establishment, Joyce ingratiated himself with a counter-élite that might dignify his bitterness as political courage. His fantasy of status and purpose destined him for Berlin, which he believed could teach England a thing or two about old-fashioned martial valor. In some ways, he prefigured the toadying

courtiers of our era's New Right, who fawn over despots with the same pick-me devotion.

West found Joyce almost beneath contempt. The bureaucratic march toward his conviction was nevertheless "more terrible than any other case I have ever seen in which a death sentence was given." Privately, she wrote, "I am consumed with pity for Joyce because it seems to me that he lived in a true hell." The deadpan pathos of her report painted this hell as a shared reality. The despair that both created Joyce and attended his execution was universal: "Nobody in court felt any emotion when he knew that Joyce was going to die." ♦

Read the original story.



The Crown Versus William Joyce

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