

A Previously Unpublished Photograph of Wyndham Lewis

Victor Barac

Last summer I purchased a photograph from the vintage photo website Historic Images.¹ It was an 8 by 10 inch close-up portrait of Wyndham Lewis. The black and white photo was in mint condition. Affixed to the back was a typed note on blue paper with the following text:

Release June 5th or later

Wyndham Lewis, noted Englishman, whose new book “America and Cosmic Man”, which Doubleday will publish June 9th, believes only Uncle Sam can save the world situation. Wyndham Lewis may always be counted on to produce a bombshell. Since 1914 he has been the enfant terrible of English art. Painter, novelist, critic, and pamphleteer, he cuts through all the foibles and fantasies of modern man to needle his spirit.

Copyright photography by Vickers – London. FROM: Louise Thomas, Doubleday & Co., Inc., W. 49th Street, NYC 20 – Circle 6-172

Just above the note was a date stamp – June 9, 1949.

I was happy to add to my modest but growing collection of Lewis artefacts and was eager to show it to my associate and fellow Lewis scholar in Toronto, Cy Fox. Right away Fox claimed never to have seen the photo before, a claim subsequently echoed by Lewis experts Graham Lane and Paul Edwards in England. Indeed it turned out to be a previously unpublished photo, part of the North American promotional package for America and Cosmic Man, Lewis’s sweeping assessment of American history, culture, politics and America’s role in the post-Second World War era. Edwards confirmed that the photo had been taken by John Vickers, a noted English celebrity photographer. Some quick sleuthing by Fox turned up vital information regarding the

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photo – a letter Lewis had written to the photographer Vickers on the 6th of August 1949. I'll let Lewis have the last word:

Dear Mr. ---. I am afraid that although *one* of the shots you took of me seemed fairly good *to me* (the one with the fist pressed up against the cheek) no one I knew shared that view: and the majority regard it as a bad photograph of myself. As for the others, and I hope you will forgive me for speaking plainly: several are unspeakable, and none are otherwise than highly displeasing to me and to everybody else. One or two are what might be described as photographic insults. Needless to say, I can make no commercial use of them, which was my purpose in having them taken. – I recall that in the preliminary talk we had you pointed out that it was altogether incorrect to say that “the camera cannot lie”. I suppose that it is also correct to say that the results can be infinitely manipulated. Of course I am sure you produced these photos with the best of highbrow intentions. But there it is. I have not exaggerated the displeasing impression, and in some cases the horror induced. ...

Sincerely,

WYNDHAM LEWIS

P. S. ... Probably you ought to have a bigger camera – but I know nothing about it. There is *something* the matter: what it is I am not competent to say

W. L.
(L 502-3)

Notes

I would like to thank Cy Fox, Graham Lane, and Paul Edwards for their help, and Heather Romaine of the Bristol University for her assistance in getting copyright clearance to publish the photo.

¹ The photograph, reproduced on the following page, is the copyright of The Bristol University Theatre Collection.