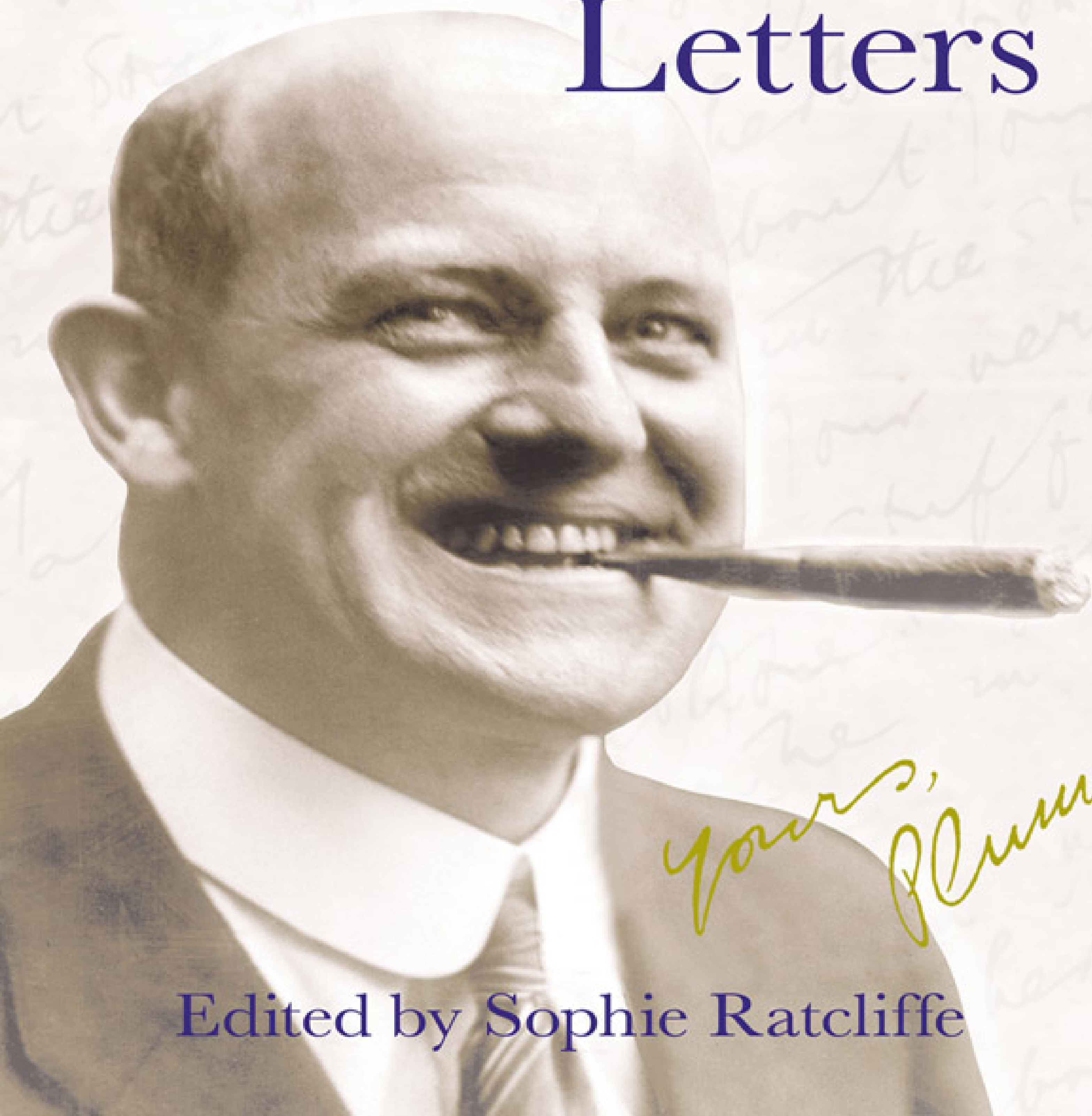
P. G. Wodehouse

A Life in Letters



Edited by Sophie Ratcliffe

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About the Book

This is the definitive edition of P.G. Wodehouse's letters, edited with a commentary by Oxford academic Sophie Ratcliffe.

One of the funniest and most admired writers of the twentieth century, P. G. Wodehouse always shied away from the idea of a biography. A quiet, retiring man, he expressed himself through the written word. His letters – collected and expertly edited here – provide an illuminating biographical accompaniment to legendary comic creations such as Jeeves, Wooster, Psmith and the Empress of Blandings.

Drawing on hitherto unpublished sources, these letters give an unrivalled insight into Wodehouse, from his schooldays at Dulwich College, the family's financial reverses which saw his hopes of university dashed, life in New York working in musical comedy with Jerome Kern and George and Ira Gershwin, the years of fame as a novelist, and the unhappy episode in 1940 where he was interned by the Germans and later erroneously accused of broadcasting pro-Nazi propaganda.

It is a book every lover of Wodehouse will want to possess.

About the Author

The author of almost a hundred books and the creator of Jeeves, Blandings Castle, Psmith, Ukridge, Uncle Red and Mr Mulliner, P.G. Wodehouse was born in 1881 and educated at Dulwich College. After two years with the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank he became a full-time writer, contributing to a variety of periodicals including *Punch* and the *Globe*. He married in 1914. As well as his novels and short stories, he wrote lyrics for musical comedies with Guy Bolton and Jerome Kern, and at one time had five musicals running simultaneously on Broadway. His time in Hollywood also provided much source material for fiction.

Born in London in 1975, Sophie Ratcliffe is a tutor in English at Christ Church, Oxford, specialising in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. She also regularly reviews fiction and criticism for the national press.

She lives in Oxford with her husband and two young children.

BOOKS BY P. G. WODEHOUSE

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Bachelors Anonymous
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BY SOPHIE RATCLIFFE

On Sympathy (Oxford University Press, 2008)

P. G. WODEHOUSE

A Life in Letters

Edited by Sophie Ratcliffe

Hutchinson
London

For all Wodehouse's heroines, imaginary and real,
especially Leonora

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Introduction

When it comes to letter-writing, P. G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster belongs to the minimalist school:

Dear Freddie, —

Well, here I am in New York. It's not a bad place. I'm not having a bad time. Everything's not bad. The cabarets aren't bad. Don't know when I shall be back. How's everybody? Cheerio! —

Yours,
Bertie.

PS. — Seen old Ted lately?

'Not that I cared about old Ted', he adds, 'but if I hadn't dragged him in I couldn't have got the confounded thing on to the second page.'[fn1]

Receiving post is, for Bertie, equally confounding. This is partly a matter of timing; morning, after all, is never the best time for reading, especially if you have a 'bit of a head on'.[fn2] But it is also because the letter, in the world of Wodehouse, is an intrusive presence – a symbol of reality permeating the all-too-secure haven of one's bachelor flat, gentlemen's club or country seat. Whether it hails from an aunt, fiancée or amorous peer of the realm, the envelope by the toast rack is a threatening sight – a crumb in the butter of the Wodehousean Eden.

Wodehouse's own attitude to letters was more positive. Many different exchanges – ranging from notes to his family to business letters and discussions of plot design –

offer a fascinating and unique insight into a twentieth-century writing life, and the history of his time. Wodehouse exchanged letters with numerous well-known figures – including artists and writers such as Ira Gershwin, Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell and Agatha Christie. He also kept up a regular correspondence with his friends and family, especially his beloved step-daughter, Leonora, or 'Snorky'.

While some might assume that Wodehouse's novels are conventional, beneath the mostly male upper-crust there is some radical table-turning. Butlers bail their masters out, passion wins over reason, and girls, invariably, know more than boys. The letters reveal the roots of this reversal. Wodehouse was a self-made man who married a chorus-girl, spent time with Hollywood movie stars, and endured Nazi imprisonment and journalistic accusations of treason. This was a life that was much more eventful than many – especially many of his younger generations of readers – might assume. As for the man himself, this 'laureate of repression' could be affectionate, naughty and tender in correspondence.[fn3]

A number of these letters touch on Wodehouse's feelings about love. Bertie Wooster declares that there are two sorts of men. Those who would like to find a woman in their bedroom, and those who would rather not. From accounts of his own marriage, Wodehouse was, in many ways, of the second sort. Nevertheless, his early letters to his friend Leslie Bradshaw contain some revealing details about his romantic encounters, while in his later letters he speculates, from time to time, on other people's sex lives, marriages and divorces.

Solvency is also a key theme of his correspondence – the getting, losing and spending of money dominates his letters as much as it does his plots. Ever since missing out on his place at Oxford, Wodehouse was driven by the idea of bringing in the 'boodle' – and he was hugely successful as an earner.[fn4] The correspondence follows his financial

fortunes, his crises with the taxman, his affectionate reflections on his wife's spending, and his gifts to friends and family.

Elsewhere, letters demonstrate the difficulties of plotting, the complexities of character creation and also the moments of inspiration. When Jeeves, 'the perfect omniscient nanny', first entered the Wodehouse oeuvre, he came in with the utmost discretion.[fn5] As Wodehouse told Lawrence Durrell, '[i]t never occurred to me that Jeeves would do anything except open doors and announce people.'[fn6]

Whether delivering an account of the difficulties of getting a small glass of whiskey during Prohibition, or giving the 'low down on the Riviera',[fn7] Wodehouse offers characteristically comic accounts of living, writing and socialising in England, America and France through the 1920s and 1930s – as well as an extraordinary account of his life in a German internment camp, in Nazi Berlin, and in occupied and post-liberation Paris.

Given Wodehouse's acknowledged skill as a novelist, it is perhaps surprising that it has taken so long for so many of these letters to be collected in one volume.[fn8] The delay comes in part from Wodehouse's unusual place in the English canon. An acknowledged master of the English comic novel, praised by philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Anthony Quinton, and writers such as T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden, he has also always been an unashamedly popular writer – one whom readers have, on the whole, simply enjoyed, rather than studied. From one perspective, Wodehouse merits a scholarly volume, directed at an academic audience – from another, he deserves a letters book aimed at the general reader. This edition seeks to serve both readerships.

Wodehouse is also a writer whose works resist a certain sort of biographical approach. He disliked investigations into his personal life and circumstances, partly because he

found them intrusive. (He wrote to his friend William Townend that their unedited correspondence should eventually 'be destroyed. Gosh', he added, 'it would be awful if some of the things I've written you were made public').[fn9] And he also intimated that biographical context was, to a degree, irrelevant to understanding a work of art. Writing about Shakespeare, he noted that 'a thing I can never understand is why all the critics seem to assume that his plays are a reflection of his personal moods and dictated by the circumstances of his private life. You know the sort of thing I mean. They say "*Timon of Athens* is a gloomy bit of work. That means that Shakespeare was having a lousy time when he wrote it." I can't see it. Do you find that your private life affects your work? I don't.'[fn10]

Indeed, while the Edwardian England of Wodehouse's early adulthood permeates his works, his personal circumstances and the tenor of his fictional worlds are not always an easy match. One of the surprises of this correspondence is the occasional, startling disparity between life and art. Take his masterly *Joy in the Morning*, written during one of the most difficult periods of his life. Just weeks after leaving Nazi internment, Wodehouse was still able to conjure up the 'embowered' hamlet of Steeple Bumpleigh, 'in the midst of smiling fields and leafy woods'. While he struggled with the weight of national disapproval, his halcyon fictional world had only one cloud on the horizon – the 'somewhat sticky affair' of Bertie, Florence Craye and 'Stilton' Cheesewright – effortlessly resolved by the shimmering Jeeves.[fn11]

Parallels between Wodehouse's correspondence and his fiction run at a deeper level. Wodehouse may have famously parodied the modernist poets, but he has more in common with T. S. Eliot than he might have admitted. For Wodehouse, as for Eliot, the aim of the written text was not to express, but to 'escape' from emotion.[fn12] It is, as he told a friend, 'hopeless to try and put down on paper what one

is feeling'.[fn13] From Wodehouse's earliest works, we find that the idea of internal psychology, in what he referred to as 'the Henry James style', is parodied and resisted.[fn14]

His letters have a similar emotional reticence. It was Dr Johnson, one of Wodehouse's earliest literary loves, who wrote that a man's soul, 'lies naked' in his letters.[fn15] Wodehouse's attitude to nudity was a wary one: 'You know my views on nudes', he once wrote to a friend, 'I want no piece of them.'[fn16] Wodehouse's letters are usually clad in the epistolary equivalent of Bertie's heliotrope pyjamas, carefully buttoned up to disguise true feeling.

The 'cladding', for Wodehouse, has always been his extraordinary written style. Drawing on the techniques of such writers as Dickens and Thackeray, Conan Doyle and O. Henry, as well as lesser-known but popular late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors such as W. W. Jacobs and Barry Pain, Wodehouse's fiction offers something unique in the history of English prose. He is, as Stephen Medcalf argues, 'the greatest and most original' of a group of writers (the list includes G. K. Chesterton, Evelyn Waugh and John Betjeman) who may have eschewed the techniques of modernism, but who still provide stylistic paths through the same insecurity that the modernists exposed.[fn17]

While such a style is difficult to analyse (one critic has compared the act to 'taking a spade to a *soufflé*'), there are a variety of figures of speech that recur throughout Wodehouse's work.[fn18] One is his subtle use of the transferred epithet – a technique that casts the state of mind of the protagonist onto a nearby, unlikely inanimate object. We have, for example, 'I balanced a thoughtful lump of sugar on my teaspoon';[fn19] 'he uncovered the fragrant eggs and b. and I pronged a moody forkful'[fn20] – or the memorable ablutions in *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*:

> As I sat in the bath-tub, soaping a meditative foot and singing, if I remember correctly, 'Pale Hands I Loved Beside the Shalimar', it would be deceiving my public to say that I was feeling boomps-a-daisy.[fn21]

The shifting of affect, from mind to limb, is not only absurdly incongruous; it has the effect of holding the emotion in question at arm's (or leg's) length. The pace of this sentence is also ingenious. It suspends its meaning, clause after clause, building up our expectations, till it sinks, like a punctured rubber duck, on 'boomps-a-daisy'. It is a phrase as unexpected – after the precision of 'if I remember', the mystique of 'Shalimar' and the rhetorical nod to 'my public' – as it is daft. But Bertie isn't even feeling 'boomps-a-daisy'; it is part of his charm that his low mood is described not only tangentially, captured in the shape of his 'meditative' foot, but through negative inference and euphemism.

Discretion also governs another feature of the typically Wodehousean syntax – his use of abbreviation. Terms such as 'posish', 'eggs and b.', 'f.i.h.s' ('fiend in human shape') and 'festive s.' ('festive season') appear both in Wodehouse's fiction and in his letters, and there is a perfectly balanced comic tension about these coded syntactical tics. The unsaidbut-understood creates a clubby feeling of intimacy between writer and reader. But there is also something subtly self-deprecating about the Wodehousean abbreviations – as if he is creating a voice that is necessarily compacted, determined not to draw too much attention to itself. As Basil Boothroyd points out, both Wodehouse's heroes and Wodehouse himself 'are vulnerable at heart'.[fn22]

Wodehouse is a writer who could easily have chosen to write quite a different sort of fiction – one ballasted by an armoury of academic knowledge. A brilliant scholar, disappointed in his hopes for university, he had an immense

grasp of literature, philosophy and Classics. Well into his later years, his letters reveal that he spent time reading Balzac, Austen, Fielding, Smollett and Faulkner, and throughout his career his writing demonstrates this literary breadth. But this is not the dense allusive erudition that one finds in writers such as Ezra Pound or Gertrude Stein. Balancing Byron and Shelley, Plato and Maeterlinck against contemporary slang, Wodehouse moves seamlessly between registers, both celebrating and diminishing the world of high art.

Wodehouse's pre-eminent stylistic flourish is his use of metaphor and simile. Page after page of his novels contain sparklingly unusual stretches of the imagination – 'Ice formed on the butler's upper slopes'; a man 'wilts' like 'a salted snail' – and one finds the same in his letters.[fn23] 'Things', he tells a friend, 'are beginning to stir faintly, like the blood beginning to circulate in a frozen Alpine traveller who has met a St Bernard dog and been given a shot from the brandy flask';[fn24] returning to New York, he reflects, 'was like meeting an old sweetheart and finding she has put on a lot of weight'.[fn25] It is a technique that does more than simply amuse. Some of Wodehouse's similes and metaphors are so extraordinary that they approach the absurd. Style, for Wodehouse, is a carefully crafted form of ludic release, and it is in the very texture of his sentences that one can see the originality of his mind at work.

Nevertheless, the letters in this volume have a very distinct stylistic difference from Wodehouse's fiction. Often written at speed, the letters show Wodehouse without his crafted style in place. Moments of great emotion break through: his excited optimism at the prospect of winning a scholarship to Oxford; his terrible disappointment when he learned that a 'varsity life was not to be his lot after all; his stoicism in the face of romantic disappointment; his devastation at the death of his stepdaughter; his

bewildered outrage and sorrow at the public response to his wartime errors.

Apart from a hiatus during the years 1915–1917, for which unaccountably no letters survive, the correspondence provides an extraordinarily detailed account, not only of Wodehouse's activities, but of his evolution as a writer: his early success in schoolboy magazines (*Mike Jackson* and *Psmith*), his rapid development as a writer in Edwardian journalism, his battles to make his mark with New York periodicals, his writing for *Playboy* magazine, and his love of 1970s TV soaps. New sources for Wodehouse's characters, from to Billie Dore to T. Patterson Frisby, are revealed – and new caches of correspondence provide important insights into his years in New York and Berlin.

It is all too often forgotten that Wodehouse was a famous lyricist and playwright as well as a novelist. As the critic Mark Steyn notes, '[h]ad Wodehouse died in 1918 he would have been remembered not as a British novelist but as the first great lyricist of the American musical.'[fn26] Wodehouse read his way through Shakespeare each year – and he adored the works of W. S. Gilbert. This book of letters has a dramatic quality of its own, with its fair share of characters standing in the wings. Wodehouse's friend and one-time collaborator, Herbert Westbrook, one of the inspirations for his comic hero Ukridge, was an influential backstage presence in Wodehouse's life. The imperious theatrical producer, Florenz Ziegfeld, was partially responsible for the numerous changes of address that we find in Wodehouse's correspondence, frequently sending verbose telegrams summoning Wodehouse from across the Atlantic to rescue his latest production. Elsewhere in these letters, we catch glimpses of Wodehouse's dealings with wayward literary agents, stroppy actresses and loyal wartime comrades. And there is his huge range of enduring non-

human attachments – Wonder and Squeaky, Bimmy and Bill, his adored dogs and cats. The most important of all behind-the-scenes presences was his wife, Ethel. In the letters, we see her negotiating prices for Wodehouse's serials, rethinking his plot ideas and liaising with agents, before heading to the local casino. Wodehouse, meanwhile, was often to be found cutting a letter short because of Ethel's pressing demands. I must stop now, he told his friend, the novelist Denis Mackail, as Ethel is 'yowling in the passage that my cocktail is ready.'[fn27]

There is a further staginess to these letters, for Wodehouse is often to be found ventriloquising a specific persona according to the perceived preference of his correspondent. With his friend Eric George, he adopts the role of a passionate but jilted inamorata out of a Thackeray sketch, then switches to the character of an ersatz Sam Weller, before brandishing his literary knowledge like an undergraduate manqué; to Leonora, he is both an adoring father and good 'pal', full of slang and silliness; when writing to Denis Mackail, Wodehouse can be unusually sarcastic and catty. Meanwhile letters to the dashing Guy Bolton have an uncharacteristic machismo about them, containing innuendos, dirty jokes and – somewhat implausibly – a mention of the 'brave old days' when Wodehouse 'used to have the clap'.[fn28] Indeed, reading these letters, one feels that Wodehouse comes close to Keats (a poet often quoted in his novels): he is a writer with 'no self at all', constantly shape-shifting to suit his audience.[fn29]

Of course, the central drama of Wodehouse's life was one in which he was an unwitting player. The story of his internment by the Nazis, and the subsequent controversy that ensued after he had made a series of humorous broadcasts on German radio, is well known. These letters, many of which have never been seen before, offer an unprecedented insight into the ways in which Wodehouse

negotiated, or failed to negotiate, the complexities of wartime Berlin and occupied Paris – and his deep fear of losing his public as a result of his error of judgement.

Given Wodehouse's lack of any real involvement in the major political events of the twentieth century, it is often asked whether there is any political aspect to his writing – indeed critics may ask how to negotiate an oeuvre that seems to resist politics so determinedly. Wodehouse's method of writing a novel was, he claims in a letter, 'making the thing frankly a fairy story and ignoring real life altogether'.[fn30] As Evelyn Waugh writes, when reading about Wodehouse's characters

> We do not concern ourselves with the economic implications of their position; we are not sceptical about their quite astonishing celibacy. We do not expect them to grow any older, like the Three Musketeers or the Forsytes. We are not interested in how they would 'react to changing social conditions' as publishers' blurbs invite us to be interested in other sagas. They are untroubled by wars. […] They all live, year after year, in their robust middle twenties; their only sickness is an occasional hangover. It is a world that cannot become dated because it has never existed.[fn31]

Wodehouse's work, however, can be seen as more than simply escapist, providing us, as it does, with the notion of an alternative universe. He is, as Auden notes, one of the 'great English experts on Eden' – he 'proclaims the dream of a world where things could be otherwise'.[fn32]

As for the politics of the man himself, these letters demonstrate something of Wodehouse's particular brand of good nature, mixed with naïveté and blindness – and 'a complete unawareness that anyone could be as ungentlemanly as the Nazis actually were'.[fn33] Wodehouse's