

IOGRAPHY ]

# Decline and Fall of a cad

For a man who wasted his wealth and talent, Willie Donaldson has been indulged by his biographer

ANTHONY  
OLDEN

**You Cannot Live as I Have  
Lived and Not End Up Like  
Me: The Thoroughly  
Ungraceful Life and Times  
of Willie Donaldson**

by Anthony Olden  
Simon Blacker  
Faber & Faber Press £12.99, pp342

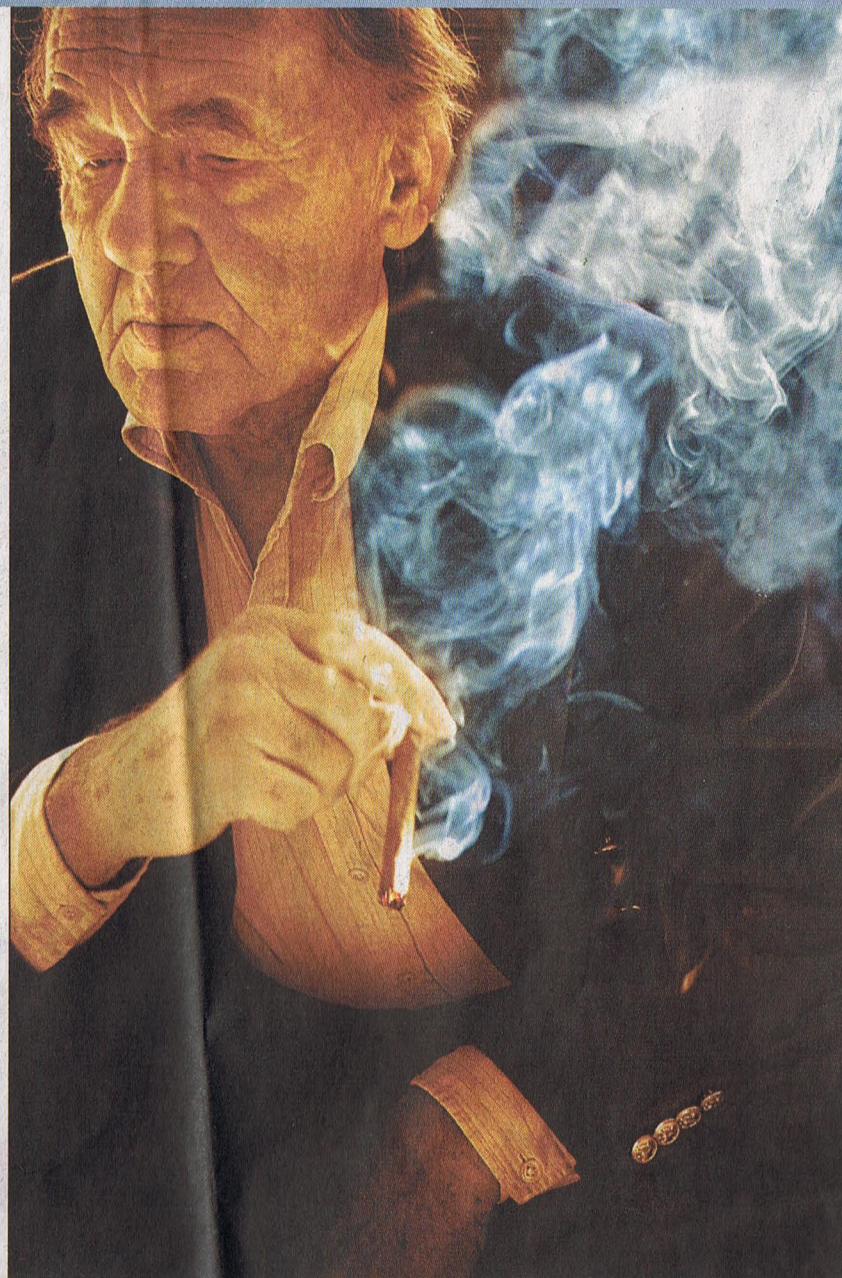
IT WAS SAD to have been Willie Donaldson. More than most well-educated, middle-class talents of his generation, he bottled his life away as a forlorn, frustrated flaneur, squandering several inherited fortunes to achieve renown under a false name playing an elaborate practical joke.

Even that was a blatant rip-off. In 1979, the African comedian Don Novello came with a US bestseller in *The Lazlo Toth* letters, a collection of polite replies from important celebrities to letters of support or protest from an apparently patriotic desperate to defend traditional values. What a wheeze, thought Donaldson, who began to fire off his own

with Donaldson, the kinkier the better. For all that, Blacker has remained loyal to his late chum, and has written a warm, painstakingly researched and almost objective account of a life largely wasted.

As a young columnist in the late Seventies, I briefly got caught up in a typical Donaldson jape, as he pre-echoed Root by taunting celebrities with phoney letters to and from one of his passing mistresses, conducted under the pseudonym Emma Jane Crampton. My involvement merits a mention in this book, rightly en passant, for there was something about the man I mistrusted; although witty and genial, he failed to draw me into his circle. How relieved I now am, after reading this brutally honest account of friendships exploited and betrayed, for all Donaldson's capacity to inspire dogged devotion in men and women alike. In his youth, the lover of such sirens as Sarah Miles and Carly Simon, he developed perverse sexual tastes described here in some detail, usually costing him large amounts of money. The same went for his business ventures.

Born into a wealthy Scottish ship-building dynasty, and ambivalent all his life about doting parents, Donaldson became pimp and producer, sexaholic and satirist, crack addict and comic writer. The producer of *Beyond the Fringe*, he fell out with all its cast, earn-



**Willie Donaldson: no smoke without ire.** Portrait by Anna Blackman

bright ideas, bankruptcy, paid escorts and sexual perversion, serial abandonment of wives, lovers and offspring, alleviated only by the success of Henry

'working with a Renaissance painter'. Only a disciple could quote on consecutive pages Donaldson's views that: 'We must live the truth, otherwise we learn

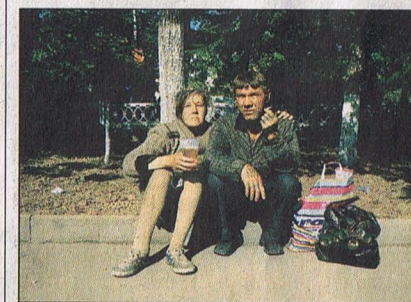
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PHOTOGRAPHY

## Motherland

Simon Roberts

Chris Boot £25, pp192



In Russia in the early Nineties a limited selection of postcards was available. My favourite showed a cartoon of a bear emerging from a giant matrioshka doll as a scantily-clad lady circus performer looked on, shocked. The English caption read: 'Unexpected Russia!' Fifteen years on and this assessment is truer than ever: Russia is indeed a strangely unpredictable place. This is the sentiment Simon Roberts evokes in his ground-breaking photographic collection *Motherland*. Roberts took in 65 destinations on an 18-month trip from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok. His pictures are unmistakably Russian, almost to the point of cliché: women walking in fur hats across snowbound squares, Cossacks astride horses, two drunks smiling dumbly from a park bench. But out of the expected, something unusual emerges. There is a universal quality to these images: they end up more a portrait of humanity than of Russia. In fact, seen through Roberts' eyes Russia is a place suffused with a peculiar, bright-eyed happiness – a sort of enthusiastic defiance. This is not what you'd expect from a portrait of modern Russia. An inspiring visual treat – and unexpectedly beautiful.

**VIV GROSCHOP**