Martin Green’s Children of the Sun, subtitled “A Narrative of ‘Decadence’ in England after 1918,” was published in the United States in early 1976 by Basic Books and, after minor adjustments in accordance with British libel laws, more than a year later in Britain by Constable, the publisher of Harold Nicolson and Lord David Cecil. The book’s title is translated from the German Sonnenkinder, a term Martin Green, an English-born lecturer at Tufts University who died in 2010, borrowed from the nineteenth-century Swiss cultural anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen. He applied it to the remarkable literary generation, described by Green as dandies, that appeared in England after the First World War and included Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell, John Betjeman, Cyril Connolly, Peter Quennell, Nancy Mitford, and others. To Green, such heroes of 1914 as Raymond Asquith and the Grenfell brothers, Julian and Billy, many of whom perished in the trenches, were “England’s last true Sonnenkinder . . . of which the post-war dandies were only the sharp-edged fragments.”

One suspects the book’s subtitle helped to annoy the surviving figures described in Green’s panorama, notably Sir Harold Acton, chosen by Green as one of his two leading lights of the post-1918 generation, together with Brian Howard, Acton’s sometimes-friend and fellow leading dandy-aesthete at Eton and Oxford. “I am bracketed with Brian Howard as a deleterious decadent,” Acton wrote, bemusedly, in a letter of July 5, 1976, to David Horner, once Osbert Sitwell’s companion. And indeed, “decadence” seems not quite the right term for so lively a generation, even if some among them—notably Connolly, who made a career of not living up to his promise, and Howard—were less industrious than others.

Green’s selection of Harold Acton and Brian Howard as emblematic of the post-1918 literary dandies was surprising in that both were atypical, even exotic, plants in England. Acton, the son of an English-born, Naples-raised art dealer, collector, and designer and an American banking heiress, was born in
1904 at a Renaissance villa called La Pietra, just outside of Florence, where his father was busy creating a magnificent garden. Harold was nursed in early childhood on the four “Bs” of Botticelli, Bakst, Beardsley, and Berenson.

Howard, a Catholic like Acton, though in his case possibly partly Jewish, came from a similar background, his father an American art dealer based in England, his mother also an American heiress. There were other boys, similarly cosmopolitan—notably Alfred and Hubert Duggan (the former a successful historical novelist, the latter an inspiration for Powell’s charming reprobate Charles Stringham in A Dance to the Music of Time)—at Eton and Oxford in the twenties but none so inclined or well-placed as Harold and Brian to be two young Oscar Wildes. They went to the Russian Ballet, kitted out in full evening dress with silver-topped canes and top hats, and spread their gospel of a dashing Aestheticism, more robust than that of the 1890s, to their dazzled contemporaries. Their natures, however, were markedly different: Acton’s kindly though mischievous, Howard’s exuberant, tormented, and self-destructive. They began to diverge at Oxford and had little to do with each other afterwards, especially when Howard caught the 1930s’ left-wing bug. This later development of Howard’s was observed with wit and perception by Cyril Connolly in “Where Engels Fears to Tread,” (1937) a mock review of a fake memoir titled From Oscar to Stalin, and in Evelyn Waugh’s compassionate portrayal of Howard in elements of Ambrose Silk in Put Out More Flags.

To Green’s mind, the post-1918 dandies sought to be eternally young men living in a commedia dell’arte world of Pierrots, Harlequins, and Columbines, rather than responsible, mature fathers as their own fathers had been. He notes that his mentor at Cambridge, the stern critic F. R. Leavis, condemned P. G. Wodehouse, beloved of many a dandy and just about everyone else, for popularizing the avoidance of maturity. Leavis was one of Green’s somewhat curiously named group of “decent men,” the others being George Orwell, D. H. Lawrence, and even the early Kingsley Amis of Lucky Jim before Amis, too, went dandy, endorsing smart clothes, snuff, and James Bond.

In fact many of Green’s dandies, including Waugh, Powell, Connolly, Quennell, Betjeman, Graham Greene, Henry Yorke/Green, Ian Fleming, and Alan Pryce-Jones, did become fathers. Insofar as neither Howard nor Acton had children, and both had difficulties with their fathers, they suited Green’s thesis. Less helpful was that these progenitors, Francis Howard and Arthur Acton, were themselves aesthetes and artists rather than conventional philistines and responsible fathers. They profited from their wives’ fortunes while being womanizers who produced illegitimate offspring and were less than exemplary family men. Harold Acton, who devoted much of the second half of his life to maintaining and preserving his father’s achievement at La Pietra for posterity, seems more the responsible grown-up than was his father.

For that matter, it is hard to believe that the post-1918 generation was the first in which sons had difficulties with their parents. Among the 1914 “golden boys,” Raymond Asquith, a perfect man to those who knew him, from John Buchan to Lady Diana Cooper, had differences with his father, the
prime minister. And the theme of Nicholas Mosley’s book on Julian Grenfell was how stifled Grenfell felt, not by his innocuous father but by his enchanting mother, in a way that recalls Saki’s Comus Bassington in The Unbearable Bassington (1912).

On its appearance in the United States, Children of the Sun aroused some interest, including a review in The New York Times Book Review by Hilton Kramer, then the Gray Lady’s art critic and the future editor and co-founder of this magazine. Kramer judged the book as “very important,” its author “a very fine critic indeed, exemplary in his intelligence as well as in his industry.” The book attracted more controversy in Britain, marked by a scorching review by Auberon Waugh in the September 1976 Books and Bookmen when the book was only available in America. Christopher Sykes, Evelyn Waugh’s biographer and described by Green as “mediatory between the dandies and the gentlemen of the Establishment,” told me that Green had mixed up various Englishmen who had nothing to do with one another. Harold Acton wisely refrained from public comment on the book. “No foolish review to Martin Green’s foolish book. To write a riposte would only give it rubbish publicity and silence is golden in such cases,” he replied to Philip Dosse, Books and Bookmen’s publisher when Dosse offered him a chance to express his view. He did tell Dosse that he “was bucked up by Auberon Waugh’s brilliant review.” To David Horner, he said he had welcomed Green, who “seemed so solemn and serious,” to La Pietra, and now he felt “thoroughly bamboozled.”

I, a young disciple of Acton and others of Green’s dandies, was inclined to agree with my spiritual uncles. While I saw Sykes’s point and relished Auberon Waugh’s review, I secretly lapped up the book. Time has proved the book “something of a classic,” as Bevis Hillier, the author of a monumental three-volume biography of Betjeman, observed in The Spectator in 2007, though it is clear to me that the book does suffer from an overreliance on Jungian mythologizing. But rather than seeking to belittle his subjects, Green, a great scholar, used their published writings instead of hunting gossip. He was on a quest, “one of those twenties’ treasure hunts,” he wrote in his prologue, “in which people drove across London, across all England, in search of some otherwise unprocurable item, something unique and unimaginable . . .”

Green had read almost everything that had been published in and about the period, even if he sometimes made slips like attributing Graham Greene’s Lawless Roads to Evelyn Waugh, confusing Max Beerbohm’s essay on “Dandies and Dandies” starring Beau Brummell with a book, and including Aubrey Herbert, “the man who was Greenmantle” and who lived until 1923, among those who died in World War I. It is wrong to say that the Sitwells were “alien” to the traditions of the family house, Renishaw, which features prominently in their writings. Sir George Sitwell put his son Osbert in the army when the latter was eighteen rather than a less reasonable thirty. And Green is not quite right for chiding English dandies for ignoring Vladimir Nabokov since Quennell did edit a book on the Russian-American author. But much to his credit, Green studied with care Acton’s and Howard’s early writings in the Eton Candle, finding Acton’s first chapter of an unfinished novel called
“Hansom Cab No. 213 bis” sharing with *The Importance of Being Earnest* “a silliness so exuberant and inventive as to give brilliant delight.” Acton found Green’s book “badly written,” but its style is in fact lively and “slightly baroque” (Hillier’s description), in tune with the subject.

The book’s prologue recounting Green’s feelings on his visit to Harold Acton at La Pietra was a highlight that Hillier thought belonged “in any anthology of twentieth-century prose.” At first flabbergasted by the magnificence and beauty he discovered at La Pietra, Green was no less impressed by his host’s urbane politeness, reminiscent to him of P. G. Wodehouse’s writing, as they chatted “of Firbank and Diaghilev, of the *commedia dell’arte* and the Ballets Russes,” all key influences Green perceived in interwar dandyism. He was frank in telling his host that he had been “a student of Leavis, an enthusiast for Orwell,” but now he wanted to explore and write about Acton’s world. In the course of his quest, it came to him that Orwell, an Old Etonian, was himself something of a dandy, as Orwell’s friend Anthony Powell later observed. Orwell, then Eric Blair, had given Cyril Connolly copies of *Sinister Street* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when they were schoolboys. Orwell defended Wodehouse and, before his death, planned to do the same for *Brideshead Revisited*, then being attacked by doctrinaire leftist critics. Orwell dined often with Acton when they were both in Paris and thought more kindly of essentially non-political aesthetes like Acton and Osbert Sitwell than he did of such “committed” writers as Brian Howard and W. H. Auden.

For Green, the real revelation was that a part of himself was a dandy and had been all along. At sixteen, he wrote a story that betrayed “a close kinship between my taste . . . and the comic nonsense that Harold Acton contributed to the Eton Candle . . .” Moreover, he saw, in the end, that most of the Englishmen he knew combined decency with a strong sense of humor that could be considered “dandy.” Though the tieless Green looks somewhat earnest in the American edition of his book, in the British version he is unashamedly dandyish wearing a coat, a smart tie, and the look of a cat who has swallowed a succulent canary. Through his exploration of Harold Acton’s world he had found that the Pierrot for whom he was searching was “a part, an important part, of my treasure, my England” that he had too long suppressed. He was now free to laugh. Even if Green’s suggestions sometimes need to be met with reservations, the book remains a rich treasure trove about the most interesting and talented literary circle of recent times.

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