



## The Last Enemy

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# **The Last Enemy**

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## **The Last Enemy** Richard Hillary

This is the true story of Second World War fighter pilot, Richard Hillary.

After being shot down in September 1940, Hillary spent several months in hospital, undergoing numerous operations; a member of Archibald McIndoe's 'Guinea Pig Club'. Originally published in 1942, just months before he died in a second crash, *The Last Enemy* recounts the struggles and successes of a young man in the Royal Air Force.

Told through Hillary's eyes, this incredible story shows that even in our darkest moments there is a glimmer of enduring hope.

## **The Last Enemy Details**

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Author : Richard Hillary

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## From Reader Review The Last Enemy for online ebook

### Mitchell says

One of the things that's struck me - looking back at history as an adult with fresh eyes, rather than with the received background wisdoms we get through early schooling or pop culture - is an appreciation of looking at past events through the eyes of people alive at the time, and how those events then compared to *their* own past. World War I, for example, seems to us like an inevitability, and a rather old-fashioned sort of war compared to the blitzkrieg of World War II; but for those living through it, it was the point at which the future started looking bleak instead of hopeful, the unhappy dark conclusion to the industrial revolution, the optimism of the Gilded Age and the green agrarian fields of Europe turned into the muddy, rusty, mechanical hell of a machine war. It must have felt like the end of the world.

Similarly, the Battle of Britain is such a proudly-remembered, immortalised landmark of history that we ironically don't appreciate it as much as we should. It was the first great air battle in human history. For thousands and thousands of years human beings had killed each other across Europe, and for nearly a thousand years Britain's geographic fortune meant it was largely protected from foreign invasion by sea. When the British Expeditionary Force packed off to France in 1939, they expected this war would turn out largely like the last one: a stalemate in the muddy trenches of the Low Countries. They certainly never expected that Britain's sovereignty might be threatened, or that the skies above London – the ultimate home front – would play host to a battle between flying machines that simply hadn't existed two generations ago. (One of the most striking images of the Battle of Britain, to me, is the contrails in the sky above St Paul's Cathedral.) The flyleaf of my copy of The Last Enemy has the oldest inscription I think I've ever seen in a book I own: "To Les, March 1943." The worst of the danger had passed by 1943 but it's still strange to think Les received this book as a gift from somebody while the war was still ongoing, when the outcome was still in play. It certainly makes history feel less far away.

Richard Hillary was an Oxford student in the 1930s who signed up to the RAF when the war broke out. The Last Enemy is an interesting first-hand description of what it was like to be one of the men so rightly idolised these days, the fighter pilots who defended Britain against the Luftwaffe and a potential invasion. Hillary was by calling a writer, though it's fair to say that this is one of those books (like *Alive* by Paul Piers Read) which is compelling not because it's told with any particular flair but simply because the events it describes are so compelling.

It's also very much a book of two halves. Hillary was shot down over the North Sea during the Battle of Britain and was badly burned on the face and hands, and the second half of The Last Enemy details his hospital treatment and recovery. In many ways this is the more interesting story: going straight from being a glamorous hot-shot fighter pilot to a pitiable and broken thing, blinded, awash on a tide of pain and morphine in a hospital bed, rendered a helpless bystander in a war he desperately wanted to go back to fighting. It also, at great length, details the kinds of things which put the lie to any notion of glamour. It's one thing to die for your country. It's quite another thing to get your eyelids burned off, have crude replacements cut from the skin of your forearm to replace them, spend months immersed in 1940s healthcare, undergo saline baths, listen to the screaming of the other patients, incubate a terrible infection in your burns, and eventually leave hospital disfigured for life to face a society that doesn't quite want to look you in the eye anymore. Hillary would certainly never say it, and maybe it's just my own medical squeamishness, but the feeling I got was that this kind of ordeal was a far worse experience than anything active combat could put you through.

*One remark of [my mother's] I shall never forget. She said: "You should be glad this has to happen to you.*

*Too many people told you how attractive you were and you believed them. You were well on your way to becoming something of a cad. Now you'll find out who your real friends are." I did.*

Hillary himself is quite an introspective fellow, though strangely for a memoir I couldn't say I really got to know him. It very much feels like he's building his own image up. More telling, I think, than any aspect of his personality he shows to the reader is the truth of his fate, which obviously isn't included in the book. He eventually managed to pass the medical board and go back to flying – not in combat, but still flying for the RAF – even though, by the account of his fellow officers, he could barely hold his knife and fork in the mess hall, got splitting headaches and had trouble reading the altimeter. Clearly there was some burning drive within him to risk his own life (and that of others), to ignore his own medical condition, to go back if not to battle than at least to the skies. He inevitably crashed and died on a night training flight in Scotland in 1943. He was twenty-four years old, which, to me these days, seems terribly young.

An interesting memoir written by a hero. A hero who joined the RAF for self-admittedly selfish reasons and was probably a bit of a narcissist, but a hero nonetheless.

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### **George Siehl says**

The copy I read was the 1983 St. Martin's Press version with an intro by flyer/writer Ernest Gann; sorry to miss the intro by Faulks, a favorite author. Gann noted the quality of Hillary's writing, and he was correct, this memoir is a work of literature. As a memoir it provides a personal perspective, and it is an honest perspective as the author is painted in unflattering terms as not a very nice person. One will not find detailed battle statistics here, but that is not the purpose of a memoir. The book is all the more arresting because of the depiction of the man within the war, not the war itself. Fortunately, that man grows less self-centered and detached with more experience of war and the loss of all his early service friends.

Hillary aspired to be a writer during his years at Oxford when athletics and fun were his major interests. The war he viewed as a means of providing himself with experience to further his writing. The graceful quality of his writing makes one regret that he did not live to write more.

What he does write about here is his fun-filled college days, his friends at Oxford who joined him in entering the Royal Air Force at the start of the WWII, his training, combat in the epic Battle of Britain, his combat crash and severe burn injuries, and slow medical recovery. The book was written as he completed this recovery. The true story is the slow but major change that saw him finally recognize a world larger than himself. He ruminates on the post-war era based on the different background of his eventual squadron mates, men not only from Oxford, but from various trades and even farmers. He wonders if these people will come to play a greater role in governance, taking their place with the gentry. Had he lived, would he have been amazed at the grocer's daughter, Margaret Thatcher, becoming Prime Minister?

A classic insight into the flyers who saved Britain.

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### **David Lowther says**

The Last Enemy is one of the best and best known memoirs of the Second World War. Hillary was a fighter pilot in the Battle of Britain who was shot down and badly burned in the Autumn of 1940. In his own words he tells of his final year at Oxford, his flying training, comradeship, his experiences fighting Germans in the air, his accident and his remarkable recovery under the auspices of the famous plastic surgeon Archibald McIndoe.

During his recovery he hears daily news of the deaths of friends and comrades at the hands of the Luftwaffe and his reflections on life, death, war and friendship make fascinating reading. Hillary's story, like his life, is short but nonetheless very compelling.

David Lowther. Author of The Blue Pencil, Two Families at War and Liberating Belsen, all published by Sacristy Press

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### **Pirate says**

Very moving on all levels..not just the Spitfires....remarkable account written during the war all the more poignant because the impressive Hillary was killed in a flying accident after somewhat surprisingly being permitted to resume flying after suffering dreadful wounds when he was shot down. The camaraderie, bravery and mixed reasons for the boys in blue are all there of course as are some entertaining anecdotes such as when he and other fellow students from Oxford go on a rowing tour of Germany and Hungary. In Germany they meet up with an elderly coach called Popeye whose English is colourful to say the least: 'My wife she drunk since two years but tomorrow she come'. We hoped he meant the boat and thankfully he did...nevertheless they duly won the Goering Fours gaining in the process the Goering Cup -- a gold shell case -- which they returned a year later out of taste....Hillary is an entertaining cove spiky with his friends especially a train journey with the zen-like Peter Pease where the latter does wonderfully well to keep his calm as Hillary desperately tries to provoke him over the reasons for his going to war -- largely a One Nation Tory style we must care for and protect the less well off -- differing vastly from the more individual one might say selfish reason for Hillary. By the end of the book Hillary is disabused of his reason in a shocking incident and it is not his shooting down. Indeed his handling of his wounds, his treatment by the extraordinary Archibald McIndoe involve little self pity -- one darkly humorous scene entails him being fed a cigarette by a nurse who then goes off only for the fag to fall from his mouth and lodge in his pyjamas leading to frantic cries for help -- and several attest to how much he had changed for the better...in spirit inversely to his physical appearance. Humour peppers the book..the patriotic captain and fellow patient who puts an RASC officer suffering from piles in his place when the latter complains about Hillary's preferential treatment in hospital remarks: "The Government will buy him a new Spitfire, but I'm damned if it will buy you a new arse!" However, never far away is the sense of loss of comrades although Hillary tries to shield himself from showing emotion...perhaps the toll is best exemplified when he writes '24 of us flew down from Montrose (to Hornchurch where they were based for the Battle of Britain) , eight flew back .' Wonderful and enriching book but sadly hard to acquire as is all but out of print but should be remedied as it merits a mass readership.

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### **Alan Morris says**

Probably THE classic amongst Battle Of Britain pilot autobiographies. Written by a writer who flew rather than a flyer who wrote, an accurate quote from his biographer. I'm glad this book has been reprinted to

coincide with the 70th anniversary of the greatest air battle of all time. It is a pity that no audiobook or ebook exists. I have created a Kindle ebook from my original 1942 1st edition and have offered it at no charge to the rights holder of the book so hopefully this option will be made available. This deserves to be read by new generations of readers as amongst all the biographies available I think that it is the one which delves most deeply into the psychology of going to war as a young man and how the experience inevitably changes you.

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### **Dave says**

For a war memoir, there isn't much war here. It's mostly about before he was a British fighter pilot in the time leading up to the Battle of Britain and his long recovery after. It reads as a first-person novel, but is limited by sophomoric philosophy of a man intent on not feeling much in life. It needs work. But, it does read genuine about the training, the flying and the recovering from war. For anyone who wants to know what it was like to fly Spitfires in the war, a must read. But there are much better war memoirs.

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### **Alex Taylor says**

This is a fascinating and thought-provoking book. How would I have performed in his situation - a 21 year old Spitfire pilot ? The self-analysis and self-criticism coupled with the lack of self pity makes this well worth a read.

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### **Rachel Brown says**

The memoir of a WWII fighter pilot who was shot down, badly burned, had his face and hands reconstructed, and then somehow managed to finagle his way back into being a pilot, where he was promptly killed in a training accident (I really hope not because he was, in fact, no longer fit to fly); this book came out three months before his death, so at least he got to see it published.

Hillary has just gone down in flames:

*There can be few more futile pastimes than yelling for help alone in the North Sea, with a solitary seagull for company, yet it gave me a certain melancholy satisfaction, for I had once written a short story in which the hero (falling from a liner) had done just this. It was rejected.*

This excerpt exemplifies the best parts of the book, which are the chapters on flying, pilot training, and recovery. (There's less on the culture surrounding his recovery (The Guinea Pig Club) than I'd hoped, possibly because he wasn't in the hospital anywhere near as long as many people were.) A lot of the memoir is devoted to philosophical conversations and musings which I found less interesting, chronicling how Hillary went from seeing war and life as something purely a matter of individual striving and enjoyment to also having a moral dimension, and from seeing himself as something of a detached observer to being connected with all humankind. The last chapter, in which he has an encounter with a woman he digs out of a collapsed house, brings together the perfectly observed details of the chapters on flying and fighting with larger issues.

Hillary was a sharp observer with a great prose style and an understated/dark sense of humor. He wasn't a pilot who wrote one book because he had an extraordinary experience he wanted to record, he was a writer who was also a pilot. I wonder if he'd have gone on to be a noted writer if he'd survived, or a minor writer whose books a handful of people really like. If the latter, I would very probably have been in that handful.

An unhappy Amazon reviewer remarks, "Too English," and it is indeed incredibly English in a very specific way, but I grew up reading books like that and for all the flaws inherent in that very specific (colonialist, among other things) outlook, I love the style.

A number of writers (J. R. R. Tolkien and Neil Gaiman, just off the top of my head) have imagined that artists continue their work in the afterlife, creating great libraries of books unwritten in life. It's the heaven I'd most like to have actually exist.

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### **Brooke Salaz says**

Recommended by Claude Lanzmann in The Patagonian Hare. The male side of the Vera Brittain story, Testament of Youth. Hillary was a student at Oxford, more interested in rowing and goofing around with friends than hitting the books by his account when WWII intervened. He trained as a Spitfire fighter pilot and the book is split between his training and participation in battles in the first half and his grueling treatment for burns sustained in a crash for the second. His writing style is rapid and merciless toward himself and his own failings. In a completely unsentimental telling which appears to come not long after the events described we sense he has not yet absorbed the full trauma and transformation from a callow, attractive, jokester to a grievously injured young man whose friends have nearly all been killed. At the end, he reaches the decision to write about his experiences to honor those lost. Movingly spare and matter of fact firsthand account of the horror and cost of war.

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### **Alex Kershaw says**

DEEPLY DEEPLY MOVING ACCOUNT OF THE EGOTISTICAL FIGHTER PILOT TRANSFORMED TO AN ARTIST/WARRIOR OF AMAZING PROMISE, KILLED TRAGICALLY WAY TOO YOUNG IN WW2. Best book of Battle of Britain I have read by far...

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### **Thom Swennes says**

Richard Hillary was born in Sydney, Australia on April 20, 1919. He is the son of a government official. Two years prior to the outbreak of World War II he enters Trinity College, Oxford. There he was the secretary of the Oxford University Boat Club, and president of the Rugby Club. Extracurricular activities played a huge role in a student's life. In 1939 Richard joined the Oxford University Air Squadron and the RAFVR; an action that would have a dramatic effect on his life.

When Britain, along with France declares war on Germany on September 3, 1939, the country was immediately mobilized for war. Men were needed to fill the ranks and trained pilots were particularly in high demand. Richard joins the 603 Squadron as a Spitfire pilot.

This is the autobiography of one of the countless young men that fought and died in the European air war of the Second World War. He displays a devil-may-care attitude and a reckless courage that only the young and innocent can embrace. I couldn't help notice a veil of impending doom that shadowed this story; while knowing that the writer of these words would not survive the war and die, near Greenlaw, Scotland at the age of twenty-three. Countless stories have been written about this war. Most of them are dramatizations of factual events or fictitious exploits. This story is more about a time and the sphere and mindset of the participants of war. I am sorry that Richard Hillary and countless other young men, on both sides of the battle line had to pay the ultimate price for a war not of their doing but I remain thankful for the stories these men were able to leave behind for posterity.

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### **Erika Schoeps says**

This was a tricky war memoir for me to read, and now its gonna be a tricky war memoir for me to rate.

Sebastian Faulks is one of my favorite authors. He writes whirlwind romances set in a historical background, and personally, I think he's a genius. For a single novel, he recounted the lives of three men that he found monumental. One of the men he picked was Richard Hillary. Intrigued, I picked up this memoir, which is highly recommended by Faulks.

This book starts slowly, and continues slowly. This novel is neither action-packed nor emotional, but it is literary. Philosophical and penetrating conversations unfold between Hillary and his acquaintances, friends, and family, and Hillary adds his own opinion. Hillary was endearing to me, but as a sort of anti-hero, he does not have a wide appeal. Hillary rarely romanticizes the situation, and takes pride in his realistic view of the world. Hillary has not joined the RAF because of a love of country... he is motivated by glory and his own view of man-on-man warfare.

The book progresses in this fashion until Hillary is shot down, and begins spending time at various hospitals. The book gets more interesting at this point, as the book finally gains some emotion. Hillary seems to have gained a bit of humanity. He has a poignant encounter with a dead friend's widow, he screws around with the nurses at the hospital, and he observes wartime England.

Because I read Faulks' biography of Richard Hillary, I gained vital information on the last relevant event in Hillary's memoir. Faulks, in his research, couldn't verify the last event in Hillary's autobiography... and its obvious from the way its written that it did not happen. Hillary's hands are horribly, horribly injured, and the action he describes himself as doing... likely, not possible. Also, the event is highly symbolic. It really touched me, showed Hillary's changing views on mankind, and wrapped things up sentimentally and elegantly. The last bit of this book really redeemed things for me.

Personally, I had trouble getting into this emotion-less memoir that showed the life of someone mostly removed from the heart of infantry battle... but for anyone who wants to read a war recollection with a literary twist, try this one out.

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### **Jim Coughenour says**

This short memoir by a RAF pilot, which I read in an attractive new edition from Vintage UK (not yet on

Goodreads), with an intro by Sebastian Faulks (best read as an afterword), impressed me much more than I'd expected. Richard Hillary was a golden boy, educated at Oxford, well-to-do, dashing, handsome, etc. He wrote *The Last Enemy* in the interval between being shot down during the Battle of Britain in September 1940 (he was badly burned on his face and hands, and endured multiple operations) and his death on a night flight in 1943.

It's hard to believe this book was written by a man barely 23. The descriptions of Oxford, flight training, deep friendships with men all killed within the first few months of war – are powerful and unsentimental. After Merchant-Ivory films, the romance of *Brideshead Revisited* and its innumerable spawn, it's easy to consider the Brits as a bit of Disney. Hillary returns his readers to the harsh horrors of what the war against Hitler meant, and the heroism of ordinary people in Britain's "darkest hour." But the force of the book is centered on a more private myth: a privileged young man "with all the luck" who is disfigured in body but noble in spirit. The book isn't perfect — how could it be? – but it has a surprising kick. This is a forgotten classic which, for all its blasé modernity, has the fierce passion of an Arthurian tale that inevitably ends in death.

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### **Camilla Tilly says**

"You should be glad this has to happen to you. Too many people told you how attractive you were and you believed them. You were well on the way to becoming something of a cad". This was said to Richard Hilary, by his mother, after he had been shot down in the Channel and got his hands and face severely burned. She must have been aware that it was not only his looks that made him a cad. This book was written by a 22-year-old cad, looks or no looks. He took nothing for serious including his studies at Oxford. Perhaps if he had, he would have been able to write a better book. Since he died before it's publication, I am sure that the publishers did not dare to touch the text at all. Had he lived, they would have had to heavily edit this book since it feels like a pot luck dinner. I am not saying that the book is all bad. Not at all. It gives the viewpoint of ONE pilot in WWII. The reason it became such a hit in 1942 is of course the fact that Britain was still at war, doing poorly and needed anything that could lift it's spirit including the story of a hero. But was he a hero really?

In my view a hero is: a man or a woman, putting aside his/her life for the common good, to save many without regard to himself/herself. Someone that wants to protect, someone that wants to fight for what is right. Hilary was a selfish cad who only did things for himself. He was in the war as a pilot to see what was in it for him, to get material to write about. His discussions with friends are highly offensive and it is amazing that anyone could stand to be in his company. Sebastian Faulks says that he was only 22 and could not write about abstract ideas. He sure is right. He describes certain things in a fun and moving way, even well at times. But other parts are less successful. If one wants to read a contemporary book about the battle of Britain time and the phoney war, this is a semi-all right book. But I would not say that it was written by an ordinary spitfire pilot but by a rebel that thought himself VERY special. He had a head as big as a balloon and because of it, the book is at times offensive. It's nice to know that plenty of pilots have written about this time. The ones that were up there to defend England! I don't care if they wrote years after the fact. Certain memories do not vanish no matter what. The real heroes are found in the silent, humble pilots!

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## **Wendy says**

I read this book with no prior knowledge of who Richard Hillary was or what had happened to him after he wrote it. I'd found a copy of this book at a church book stall, a tattered and musty 1943 edition, which once I had read the first few lines of the Proem I was hooked by, I paid my 25p and wandered off to start reading.

After the captivating Proem, the book becomes an autobiographical novel which is broken into two parts. Book one begins with the authors charmed days rowing and occasionally studying at Oxford, his joining the Oxford University Air Squadron, his subsequent RAF training and deployment to 603 City of Edinburgh squadron to fly spitfires, up until him being shot down. Book two focuses on life after, his rehabilitation and the pioneering work of his surgeon Archibald McIndoe to repair his fire ravaged body, his coming to terms with life as it will now be and his realisation that some of his firm held beliefs are no longer sustainable and that some of his actions and the treatment of his friends in the past begin to haunt him.

[my full review here](#)

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