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Spicier than a novel, the literary feud raging between the Amis dynasty and the Marxist critic

by GEOFFREY LEVY

It's the vicious feud that's got the book world gripped: In one corner, Britain's foremost literary dynasty. In the other, the critic who's branded Kingsley Amis a racist, misogynist and homophobe.

They are words that can destroy a reputation overnight - "racist", "anti-Semite", "homophobe", "misogynist". It doesn't leave much out, and it does seem strange that a dozen years have passed since the death of Kingsley Amis before someone has put the whole package together and accused the author of Lucky Jim of the lot.

The claim is made in the foreword to a learned book by the prominent Marxist intellectual Terry Eagleton, who reserves his final major accusation, Islamophobia, for Kingsley's author son, Martin.

The outburst has set up one of those bitter, but highly colourful, literary rows that is every bit as entertaining as the protagonists' books.

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But this is serious. So serious that Kingsley Amis's former wife, the writer Elizabeth Jane Howard, a doughty 84, has leapt angrily to his defence - though not about misogyny (she found his womanising intolerable, divorced him over it, and later wrote that Amis had "regarded women as intellectually inferior, often as pests").

Her brother, Colin, who is gay, has also joined the battle to defend the Amis reputation, denouncing Eagleton's allegation that Sir Kingsley was a homophobe as "silly".

For his part, the Roman Catholic-born Professor Eagleton, who increasingly despises those Left-leaning authors he considers to have "sold out" to the Establishment, does not mince his words.

In a foreword to the 2007 edition of his classic book, *Ideology: An Introduction*, he flays Kingsley Amis for being "a racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals".

And, in a damning afterthought, he adds: "Amis *filis* has clearly learned more from [his father] than how to turn a shapely phrase."

The trigger for the attack on Martin Amis, author of *London Fields* and eight other novels, is a highly controversial essay he wrote marking the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 destruction of New York's Twin Towers.

In it, Amis Jr argued that the fundamentalists had won the battle between Islam and Islamism, and

that "the Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order".

He suggested it might be necessary to strip-search people who look as though they are from the Middle East or from Pakistan, restrict Muslims' travel and, ultimately, even consider deportation.

Professor Eagleton caustically observes that these views are "not the ramblings of a British National Party thug, but the reflections of Martin Amis, a leading luminary of the English metropolitan literary world".

Amis, 58, is seldom slow in arguing his own corner, but thus far has declined to be drawn into a battle which could get bloody.

His father, however, is unable to defend himself and thus it has fallen on his former wife, who was married to him for 18 years, to rally to his cause.

But could the professor be right in his accusations against Amis Senior? Kingsley certainly liked a drink, lots of drink - usually whisky - and was, indeed, frequently drink-sodden and self-hating, especially when, late on in his life, impotence halted his sexual activities.

So let's put this on one side, since it could hurt no one but himself. But was he also homophobic and anti-Semitic?

In letters to his great friend, the poet Philip Larkin, and others, he does refer with an apparent lack of grace to "queers" and "poofers".

In one letter to Larkin written in 1979, after Margaret Thatcher's election victory, he refers to the former Liberal leader, Jeremy Thorpe, as a "murdering queen" - Thorpe was cleared of trying to arrange the death of his former lover, Norman Scott.

And in other letters, the evidence that - privately, at any rate - he was anti-Semitic appears to be strong.

There is a lengthy letter to Larkin in 1957 about publication of one of his books that had been cut, in which he writes: "To hear that you find it tolerable is a great relief. Book due before Xmas they said, only I've had a clipping from some trade paper that says Jan, filthy lying profiteering bugger-the-author Yids."

And writing to Larkin in 1983 he writes: "(presumably Charles) Chaplin is a horse's arse. He's a Jeeew, you see. Like the Marx brothers. Like Danny Kaye."

In 1988 to poet Robert Conquest: "The sight and sound of one of the most horrible females ever seen on TV, one Margot Adler (U.S. of course) . . . leads me to conclude that the great Jewish vice is glibness, fluency."

And 1992 to the novelist Brian Aldiss: "It's rather like being a Jew, no matter what you do or don't do, you can't help being one."

Despite these jibes, he did write one letter, in 1962 when he was teaching at Cambridge, in which he declared: "It may be tedious and not with-it to say so, but anti-Semitism in any form, including the fashionable one of anti-anti-anti-Semitism, must be combated."

Unlike the other letters, which were written privately to friends, this one was to the editor of The Spectator and was for publication.

As for his alleged homophobia, Colin Howard, 73, points out that he was not only Kingsley Amis's homosexual brother-in-law, but "I lived with him and my sister for 17 years. During that time we became very close and affectionate friends".

He adds: "I wonder if everything Prof Eagleton writes is as lazy and silly as his attacks on Kingsley and Martin Amis?"

"Kingsley would have been far more articulate than I am in defending him against a little squirt like Eagleton, but as he's not around we had to do it for him."

Furthermore, Howard's sister Elizabeth Jane, these days living in Suffolk, far from the metropolitan literary scene in which she used to be one of the most fashionable icons, points out that when she and Kingsley got married, they had four witnesses at the ceremony - three of them were Jewish and one was gay.

Kingsley was her third husband, she his second wife, and the 1965 wedding was at Marylebone register office.

The homosexual witness was Ms Howard's brother Colin. The remaining witnesses, all Jews, were Tom Maschler, the publisher, Bill Rukeyser, who became a major financial commentator and founder of Money magazine, and Cyril Frankel, a film director who later became an expert on ceramics.

"They were all such great friends and we had such a wonderful day," said Ms Howard yesterday.

"The only other person there was my daughter, Nicola, who wasn't a witness. We had lunch at Prunier's and Cape (his publishers) gave us a big drinks party in the evening.

"Tom and Cyril had been friends for years. Bill was Kingsley's student when he was teaching at Princeton and, when Kingsley moved to Cambridge, Bill came over, too, so that he could continue his studies under him.

"He came to see me just the other day with his lovely wife - such a smashing man. He and Kingsley were very close until his death. Do you really think they could have that kind of friendship, that tremendous bond, if Kingsley was a racist or an anti-Semite?"

"I can honestly say I never heard him behave badly towards Jews, and when he taught in America he was always angrily protective of blacks under pressure from the whites."

How, then, does she account for the shocking observations in his letters? "You really cannot take them seriously because he enjoyed being rude about absolutely everybody," she said.

"Even when The Observer gave a marvellous party for him, he managed to be awfully rude about it. That was his way, how he got fun out of life.

"He did have moments of behaving very badly, I have to say, but it was always either for the sheer fun of it or just taking the mickey out of people. But everyone knew he didn't mean it. It was just words.

"I wish I knew what gave rise to this attack. I have never even heard of this man Eagleton. But he seems to be a rather lethal combination of having been a Roman Catholic and become a Marxist - that strikes me as a rather uncomfortable progression, to put it mildly.

"He strikes me as like a spitting cobra - if you get within his range, he'll unleash some poison. He's probably saying all these things just to publicise the new edition of his book."

Well, it's certainly done that. It is also true that in Amis's letters, Jews are far from the only targets. Kingsley lets no one off his cruel hook, referring, in another letter to Larkin in 1982, to a "conning, stealing queer Irishman".

If there is real bitterness there, his old friends put it down to the unravelling of his life, which ended up with him depending for domestic shelter for the last years of his life, living in the home of his first wife, Hilly, and her writer husband, the 7th Lord Kilmarnock.

"I wish Kingsley were here to fight back," said his former wife. "He loved a good feud."

However, if his former wife is right in her defence, therein lies the key difference between father and son. Kingsley may have been poking fun, but Martin, as ever, was deadly serious in his attack on Islam.

Martin may thus far have avoided a confrontation, but sooner or later there has to be a showdown, probably in the senior common room at Manchester University, where Eagleton has been professor of cultural theory since 2001, and where Amis has just arrived as professor of creative writing.

But why would Elizabeth Jane Howard go to so much trouble to protect the reputation of the man who made her so miserable?

Perhaps the answer can also be found in the letters. In one, Kingsley said that "women appear to me as basically dull, but as basically pathetic, too."

But in another, to Elizabeth Jane Howard herself in 1963, two years before their marriage, he said: "I like women more than I did through being your lover."

"Yes," said the great authoress last night, "it *was* a beautiful thing to say."

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