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Malcolm Muggeridge's journey

by *Roger Kimball*

On the British writer, television personality, and moral and religious gadfly Thomas Malcolm Muggeridge at 100.

I came to Carthage, where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lusts. I had not yet fallen in love, but I was in love with the idea of it, and this feeling that something was missing made me despise myself for not being more anxious to satisfy the need. I began to look around for some object for my love, since I badly wanted to love something.
—St. Augustine, *Confessions*

Diversion is the only thing that consoles us in our wretchedness, and yet diversion is itself the greatest of our miseries. For it is diversion above all that keeps us from seriously taking stock of ourselves and so leads us imperceptibly to perdition.
—Pascal, *Pensées*

There are people for whom evil means only a mal-adjustment with things*, a wrong correspondence of one's life with the environment. Such evil as this is curable, at least in principle, upon the natural plane. . . . But there are others for whom evil is no mere relation of the subject to particular outer things, but something more radical and general, a wrongness or vice in his essential nature, which no alteration of the environment, or any superficial rearrangement of the inner self, can cure, and which requires a supernatural remedy.*
—W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

March 2003 marked the centennial of the British writer, television personality, and moral and religious gadfly Thomas Malcolm Muggeridge. The "Thomas," which Muggeridge never used, was after Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle's fulminations against modernity, the "cash nexus," materialism, etc., greatly impressed Muggeridge père, a factory clerk and earnest Fabian reformer in Croydon, south of London. H. T. Muggeridge was the overwhelming influence on Malcolm's early life, and so it was only natural that Carlyle's animadversions should greatly impress him, too. The third of five boys, Malcolm once claimed that Carlyle was the greatest influence on his literary style. I doubt that. But Muggeridge did become an accomplished fulminator, sometimes of conspicuous, even Carlylean, gloominess. If he never produced anything to equal Carlyle's great historical works, he did rival the sage of Chelsea in the ferocity of his denunciations—also his

enthusiasms—and may have outdone Carlyle in the deployment of gleefully deflationary wit. He certainly wrote more digestible prose.

Muggeridge is not much of a presence today, though his anniversary is sparking a minor recrudescence of Muggeridgiana. A painstaking and informative biography by Gregory Wolfe, originally published in 1995, will be re-issued with a brief new preface later this year.[1] (Richard Ingrams's shorter, more sprightly life, also published in 1995, is unfortunately out of print.) Sprouting here and there are panels, symposia, and conferences devoted to "St. Mugg"—as the cartoonist Wally Fawkes ("Trog") once denominated him—as well as sundry essays with titles like "Malcolm Muggeridge's Journey."

I suspect it will prove to be a brief and haphazard revival, however, and more's the pity. Muggeridge is a tonic force, well worth resuscitating. He could be crankish. Sometimes he was downright absurd. But, at least until the last decade of his life, when his powers guttered, he was rarely merely crankish. Often he was incandescently perceptive. Above all he provided an intelligent admonitory voice, a voice against the grain of received opinion, urging caution, broadcasting unwelcome truths, nudging his interlocutors beyond the warm circle of their self-absorption.

In his heyday, which stretched from the 1930s through the 1960s and into the 1970s, Muggeridge was a formidable figure. He commanded prodigious literary and rhetorical gifts. He knew everyone: the infamous as well as the famous. He traveled everywhere: teaching in India and Egypt as a young man, on assignment in Moscow, Washington, New York, Berlin, Tokyo . . . In World War II, Muggeridge was a spy with MI6, stationed in Mozambique. He was, according to one biographer, an "outstanding secret agent," through whose ministrations a German U-boat was captured. Muggeridge was also a nimble public performer, quick with a comeback, heedless of sacred cows. His enemies (never in short supply) belabored his inconsistencies, his "contradictions"; he gloried in them.

Over the course of his long career (he died in 1990 at eighty-seven), Muggeridge published a clutch of novels. In 1931, his play, *Three Flats*, was performed in London. (George Bernard Shaw, who had already read the work, was in the audience opening night.) "From earliest childhood," Muggeridge noted, "it always seemed to me that the only thing worth doing in life was to write."

But Muggeridge was not really Muggeridge in his purely literary efforts. His best work was in the realm of journalism, taking that term in its highest and broadest sense. He wrote about virtually every signal public event and personality from around 1930 through the 1970s. And yet he invariably interwove description with introspection. Reporting the news was part of assembling his autobiography. By the same token, his autobiographical writings—published are a volume of diaries and *Chronicles of Wasted Time*, a two-volume memoir that takes Muggeridge through World War II—are instinct with the news and personalities of the day.

Muggeridge seems to have written for just about every important English paper and journal, including *The Spectator*, *Encounter*, *The Listener*, *The New Statesman*, *The Manchester Guardian* (where he became chief leader writer at twenty-seven), *The Telegraph* (where he was deputy editor for a spell), and *Punch*, which he edited for nearly five years in the 1950s. Muggeridge also wrote for many American publications. He had a column at *Esquire*—a publication that once mattered—and his work would regularly turn up in *The New Republic*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and other illustrious venues. By late 1940s he was a familiar figure on BBC radio. By the late-1950s he was ubiquitous on BBC television, where his cantankerous wit, oddly patrician appearance (replete with cigarette-and-holder for histrionic effect), and braying, Cambridge-trumps-Croydon accent transfixed audiences. A patent of his celebrity came in 1968 when his wax figure was unveiled at Madame Tussaud's, sharing a room with Elizabeth Taylor, Charles de Gaulle, Alfred Hitchock, and the Beatles, among others.

In his prose, Muggeridge tended to proceed by imbrication, layering his analysis of appearance, character, and achievement—the whole set firmly in the context of world events—to produce memorable, often devastating, portraits. In 1956, after the Suez crisis, Muggeridge had this to say about Prime Minister Anthony Eden:

> His somehow slightly seedy good looks and attire, his ingratiating smile and gestures, the utter nothingness of what he had to say—did it not all provide an outward and visible manifestation of an inward and invisible loss of authority and self-confidence? Yes, it was entirely fitting that this tedious, serious Etonian, on whose lips were the last dying echoes of the late nineteenth-century concept of progress without tears, should have had his moment in the middle of the turbulent and cruel twentieth century. He was a Disraeli hero who had moved into a service flat. . . . As has been truly said, . . . he was not only a bore, he bored for England.

Has Eden's essential fecklessness ever been more piquantly sketched? Can anyone who has heard of the man who not only "bored, but bored for England" forget the characterization?

Deflationary finales were one of Muggeridge's specialties. After World War II, he went to Tokyo and witnessed a public appearance by the Emperor: a "nervous, shy, stuttering, pathetic figure, formerly god."

There was a large streak of the contrarian in Muggeridge. If all good society were united in believing "X," he was likely to give "not-X" a sympathetic airing. It was part of his lifelong campaign against highminded earnestness—which is not, I hasten to add, the same thing as a campaign against seriousness. Sometimes, it is true, Muggeridge was merely impish. It was part of what made him an effective television performer. An interview with Salvador Dalí began with this exchange:

> MUGGERIDGE: I know we're supposed to discuss modern art, and I expect we shall, but first of all may I say I'm fascinated by your moustaches. Might I ask what happens to them at night?
> DALI: They droop.

When the evangelist Billy Graham replied to a question by saying that "Only God could answer that one," Muggeridge instantly interjected: "And we haven't got him in the studio, or"—casting his eyes upwards—"have we?"

Muggeridge was a complex, many-sided creature. He was a driven man, plagued by insomnia, night fears, and nameless yearnings for surcease. His joking, bad-boy antics were played partly for laughs, for "ratings." But they also, I believe, had a more serious purpose. In the mid-1950s, when the scandal about Princess Margaret and Group Captain Townsend was fresh, he wrote a couple of exasperated pieces about the royal family. The title of the first, "Royal Soap Opera," epitomizes his point.

Muggeridge's criticism seems anodyne by today's standards. But it caused a furor at the time. The BBC banished him (temporarily) from its airwaves. *The Sunday Express* thundered that Muggeridge had "earned the contempt of all Britain." A stranger spat at him in Brighton; his cottage at Robertsbridge was defaced with slogans by empire loyalists; a neighbor told him he was no longer welcome to walk across his fields: the wages of candor. In the United States, Muggeridge was interviewed by Mike Wallace. He dispensed his usual quota of pleasantries. Wallace quoted the British MP Michael Astor's remark that Muggeridge's "genius is for disliking [his] fellow human beings."

> Well, if my fellow human beings were all Astors, there might be some element of truth in that, but fortunately for us all, the Astor family is a large one, but not so large that it's occupied the whole human race.

That sort of thing keeps people entertained. But Muggeridge also went on to make this serious point.

> The essence of a free and civilized society is that everything should be subject to criticism, that all forms of authority should be treated with a certain reservation, and . . . that once you have produced . . . a totally conformist society in which there were no critics, that would in fact be an exact equivalent of the totalitarian societies against which which we are supposed to be fighting a cold war.

It is worth noting that in suggesting that "all forms of authority should be treated with a certain reservation," Muggeridge is not denying the legitimacy of authority—what we might call the authority of authority. On the contrary, he hoped that constructive criticism would help bolster the claims of authority. He knew too well what happened when authority collapsed. It is one of the main themes of *The Thirties* (1940), perhaps his most comprehensive piece of social observation. Reviewing the book, George Orwell described this tart moral and political portrait of the decade as "brilliant and depressing." Like many readers, Orwell thought the book too negative—a sobering judgment from the author of *1984*—but he subscribed to its main lesson, that "We are living a nightmare precisely *because* we have tried to set up an earthly paradise."

Muggeridge was weaned on well-scrubbed attempts to set up an earthly paradise. It was a

main plank of the Fabian creed: to dispense with the burdensome scaffolding of the past, its selfish institutions, its superstitions, its allegiance to outmoded vices like competition and greed. Love, harmony, brotherhood—an end to the depredations of inherited wealth, inherited . . . anything. Onwards, upwards, unfettered progress forever and ever. Not only was Muggeridge raised in that creed, he also married into it. Kitty Dobbs was the beautiful, freethinking niece of Sidney and Beatrice Webb; in marrying her, he noted many years later, he was marrying into "a sort of aristocracy of the Left."

Muggeridge's great gift as a political commentator was a nose for spurious idealism. Like nearly every right-thinking (which meant left-leaning) person, the young Muggeridge regarded the Soviet Union as the first chapter of the new utopia. When he went there as Moscow correspondent for *The Manchester Guardian* in the early 1930s, disabusement was almost immediate. As a leader writer, Muggeridge had tapped out "Many an uplifting sentence . . . expressing the hope that moderate men of all shades of opinion would draw together, and that wiser counsels might yet prevail." In Moscow, he discovered that "moderate men of all shades of opinion had a way of disappearing into Lubinka Prison, never to be seen again." Muggeridge saw the future, and—unlike Lincoln Steffens a decade earlier—he saw that it was hell on earth. Russia, he understood, was in the process of becoming "a huge and centrally organised slave state." It wasn't long before he was writing to his aunt-by-marriage Beatrice about his

> overwhelming conviction that the [Soviet] Government and all it stands for, its crude philosophy (religion if you like) is evil and a denial of everything I care for in life. . . .

> Why should uncle Sidney say . . . "I indignantly repudiate the slander that there is forced labour in the Soviet Union" when every single person in Russia knows there is forced labour . . . ?

A glimpse of Stalin's Russia spurred Muggeridge's political awakening. It is to his everlasting credit that he had the wit to see through his Fabian "ideals" and the courage to broadcast the horrors going on around him. In the beginning, at least, he was almost alone. Western intellectuals flocked to the workers' paradise that Stalin had created and "they were one and all utterly delighted and excited by what they saw there."

> Clergymen walked serenely and happily through the anti-god museums, politicians claimed that no system of society could possibly be more equitable and just, lawyers admired Soviet justice, and economists praised the Soviet economy.

As for the Webbs and their starry-eyed ideal of universal brotherhood, Muggeridge summed it up in a dismissive BBC broadcast after their deaths. Comparing Beatrice to Don Quixote, he wrote that "she finished up enmeshed in her own self-deception, adulating a regime [the USSR] which bore as little relation to the Fabian Good Life as Dulcinea del Toboso to the Mistress of Don Quixote's dreams."[2]

Muggeridge was one of the first—perhaps he was *the* first—Western journalist to expose the awful brutality of Soviet totalitarianism. He was equally prescient about Hitler, early on warning against the British policy of appeasement. In addition, Muggeridge had the rare perspicacity to understand that left-wing tyranny is no less murderous than the right-wing variety. Reporting from Berlin in 1933, he wrote that "It's silly to say that the Brown terror is worse than the Red Terror. They're both horrible."

It is one thing—an important thing—to proclaim the bestiality of Communism or Nazism. It is quite another to discern the ways in which liberalism itself nurtures unfreedom. By the 1950s, Muggeridge had come to believe that liberalism is "*the* destructive force of the age." In part, his criticism was reminiscent of Tocqueville's. Unchecked, the impulse to equality became an impulse to homogeneity: the drive for democracy involved a democratic despotism that did not, as Tocqueville put it, so much tyrannize as infantilize. "The welfare state," Muggeridge observed, "is a kind of zoo which provides its inmates with ease and comfort and unfits them for life in their natural habitat."

But Muggeridge's brief against liberalism went deeper. Liberalism, he thought, illustrated the paradox of good intentions, whereby the opposite of what was intended comes to pass. Consider education. Scratch a liberal, and he shouts "Education!" Whatever social or political problem society confronts, good liberals huddle together and decide "What's needed is more and better education." (Obligatory codicil: "And the money—i.e., your money—to pay for it.") Is crime a problem? Education is the answer. Poverty? Education is the answer. War, violence, sickness, unkindness, death? Education, education, education. If only, the liberal muses, everyone were awakened to his or her own true interests, all the world's problems could be solved. But this notion, Muggeridge saw, is an illusion. Liberalism proposes what is unattainable:

> that we little men and women should live in amity together on our minute corner of the universe for the few score years vouchsafed us, of our own volition seeking one another's good and sharing equitably in the material things which satisfy our needs and desires. This is a fantasy. This, in human terms, cannot be. Therefore, the effect of believing in it is constantly tearing the world to pieces.

On the question of liberalism, as indeed on much else, Muggeridge's thinking was close to that of Dostoevsky, one of his favorite authors. He understood that some men (and women) do nasty things not because they are ill-informed but because they are nasty. Evil is not something an especially plush government program is going to eliminate. Evil is irremediable. The liberal's cheery vision of universal brotherhood is false because it is based on an abbreviated view of

human nature. "If," Muggeridge wrote, "you envisage men as being only men, you are bound to see human society . . . as a factory farm in which the only consideration that matters is the well-being of the livestock and the prosperity or productivity of the enterprise." Liberalism is like utilitarianism in proposing to superintend happiness. But the happiness on offer is the blunt palliative of animal satisfaction: satiety, not joy.

In 1938, Muggeridge published *In a Valley of This Restless Mind*. It was commissioned to be a survey of contemporary religous ideas. What turned out was an odd but powerful sort of spiritual autobiography, a portrait of existential anguish and bewilderment that begins "Looking for God, I sat in Westminster Abbey and watched sightseers drift by." Pascal, another Muggeridge favorite, characterized the human condition as bounded by "*inconstance, ennui, inquiétude*"—fickleness, boredom, and restlessness. Restlessness was Muggeridge's constitutional affliction, boredom his overpowering fear. *Valley* is an sly acknowledgment of that fact, part ventriloquizing credo, part disaffected satire.

> "What are you interested in?" asks the literary editor.
>
> I said I was interested in Lust and in Money and in God.
>
> "I've seen a book lying about that might be suitable. Short notice if worth it."

In a favorable review of the book, Evelyn Waugh noted that "what Mr. Muggeridge has discovered and wishes to explain is the ancient piece of folk-wisdom that Lust and Love are antithetical and that Lust is boring." Muggeridge's life is an illustration of the Pascalian insight that restlessness is a secret friend of boredom, feeding on what it abominates in order to sustain itself. Which is to say that what is boring may also be addictive.

Today, to the extent that he is known at all, Malcolm Muggeridge is more notorious than famous. He is remembered less for the truths he communicated than for the life that he led. He is the Libertine Who Found God, a latter-day St. Augustine who lingered in the flesh pots before turning to denounce them and embrace religion. Muggeridge lingered longer and more assiduously than most. He was an ambitious smoker, heavy drinker, and tireless adulterer. (His wife Kitty, it is worth noting, also pursued numerous adulterous liaisons; her last child, Charles, was fathered by one of her lovers.) According to Richard Ingrams, by the 1960s Muggeridge's behavior towards women

> had become embarrassing and frequently outrageous. BBC colleagues called him "The Pouncer." Patricia, [his friend] Claud Cockburn's wife, compared him to a Russian peasant, describing an incident when during a dinner party she went upstairs to make a phone call and was pursued by Malcolm who began to assault her. Outraged, Patricia struck out at him with the telephone, knocked him down and flew into a panic, convinced that she had killed him.

By the mid-1960s, Muggeridge had said goodbye to all that, giving up smoking first, then booze, then womanizing. Plagued by digestive problems, he also became a vegetarian. In 1982 he entered

the Roman Catholic Church. His enemies, and even his friends, were not edified. They saw in him the aging reprobate who, stymied by flagging appetite, rails against the sins of his youth and cravenly turns to religion. The fact that Muggeridge launched Mother Teresa as a celebrity in the late 1960s, devoting a television show and book to her life and work, seemed to underscore the divide between Muggeridge the worldly wit and Muggeridge the retiring ascetic.

What this familiar criticism overlooks is the extent to which Muggeridge had always been a deeply religious character, a "pilgrim." As an adolescent, he would secretly read the Bible—secretly, because he knew his father would not have approved. At Cambridge, he seriously contemplated a religious vocation. His diary is full of entries minuting his religious fears, cravings, and exaltations. Muggeridge understood that the merely human is at best the nearly human. At the same time, his revulsions are at odds with the ampleness of the faith he proclaimed. In an interview from the 1960s, Muggeridge said that he "saw life as an eternal battle between two irreconcilable opposites, the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit." Yet "God made the world and saw that it was good." It seems a pity that this robust soul should have mistaken affirmation for indulgence.

Notes

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1. *Malcolm Muggeridge: A Biography*, by Gregory Wolfe; Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 490 pages, $15 (paper). Go back to the text.
2. "I listened to the broadcast with growing horror, incredulity, and anger," responded the chairman of the BBC. "The Webbs were personal friends of mine… . [N]obody can doubt that they were great public servants; after all they were buried in Westminster Abbey… ." *After all*, indeed. Some things never change. Go back to the text.

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