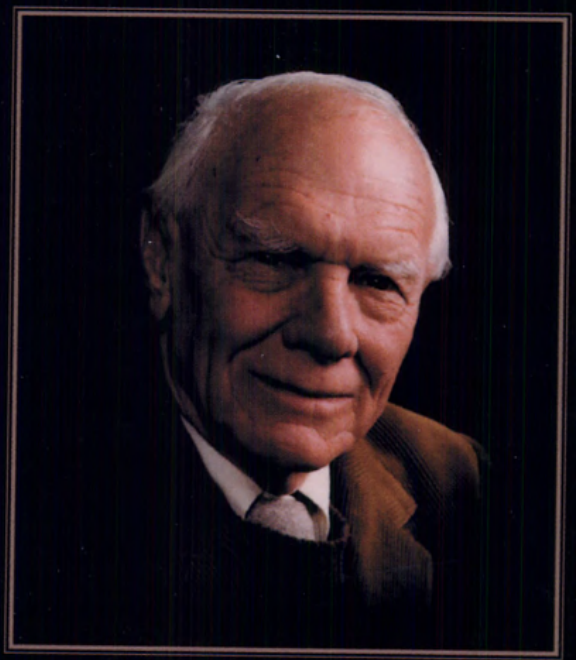
MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE
A LIFE



IAN HUNTER

Copyrighted material

MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE
A LIFE

by

IAN HUNTER

REGENT COLLEGE PUBLISHING
• Vancouver, British Columbia •

Copyrighted material

MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE: A LIFE
Copyright © 1980 by Ian A. Hunter

First published 1980 by Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville.

This edition published 2003 by Regent College Publishing
5800 University Boulevard, Vancouver, BC V6T 2E4 Canada
<www.regentpublishing.com>

Views expressed in works published by Regent College Publishing are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of Regent College <www.regent-college.edu>.

Cover photograph courtesy of the Evangelical Broadcasting Company of Holland. Used by permission.

The publisher and author wish to thank Claud Cockburn for permission to quote from his autobiography, *I Claud* (Penguin Books, London).

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Hunter, Ian, 1945-
Malcolm Muggeridge: a life / by Ian Hunter.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-57383-259-6

1. Muggeridge, Malcolm, 1903- 2. Journalists—Great Britain—Biography. 3. Authors, English—20th century—Biography. 4. Christian biography—Great Britain. I. Title.

PR6025.U5Z68 2003 070'.92 C2003-910720-5

Copyrighted material

CONTENTS

Copyrighted material

INTRODUCTION

Any satisfying biography must have its roots in a deep and varied life. Malcolm Muggeridge's life has been that. He has been at the center of many of the important events of this troubled, fascinating century. He has written about them—and how he has written!—in dispatches, editorials, essays, social history, biography, fiction, and autobiography. He has spoken about them in lecture halls and on radio and television. He has participated in more than a few; some he even has precipitated.

I first conceived this book more as a study of his writing than of his life. However, it quickly became apparent that none of his writings, including the novels, can be separated from his life. So my plan altered, and the book became more overtly biographical. Of course, there is always a danger of falling between two stools; of being inadequately detailed for biography, and inadequately searching to say anything very useful about his writing and thought. Whether or not this danger has been averted is for others to judge. It was recognized.

Even more acutely recognized was the danger of hagiography. I admire Malcolm Muggeridge; I have passed some of the most pleasurable hours of my life in his company; I have learned more from him than from any other human being. Despite this, I can say with total honesty that while writing I was conscious of no inhibition, no obligations of fealty, no loyalty dues. Perhaps in light of his past kindnesses to me I ought to have been, but I was not. If admiration and affection for one's subject disqualified a biographer, the field would be much impoverished. Not only would there be fewer biographies (no bad thing in itself), but many of the best and best-loved classics of the genre, preeminently Boswell's immortal life of Johnson, would be lost.

My profession is the law. I have tried to be suspicious of an exculpatory explanation or a self-serving answer, and instead have attempted to arrive at conclusions after sifting and weighing the evidence. My

Copyrighted material

brief has been to present the evidence, not to make a defense. Whether the verdict be for or against the subject, I have tried to base it on the evidence.

The biographer's art is an exercise in arrogance. It assumes that a man's hidden thoughts and desires, his motives and aspirations, his works and opinions, can be unraveled and critically assessed through an examination of his life and writings. Words, just clumsy, inadequate words laid beside one another on flat paper, attempt to breathe life into their subject and—even more audaciously—to impart a measure of coherence and unity to that welter of chaotic events and emotions that make up the strange adventure of each human life.

Arrogance is compounded with folly when one essays to write of a writer, at least of one so practiced and flexible as Malcolm Muggeridge; as though a vaudeville hoofer should attempt to dance Nureyev, or a man who sings in the shower to serenade Pavarotti, or a keyboard basher to play Rubenstein. Muggeridge is a consummate artisan of words who, through half a century of practicing journalism, has had the opportunity and the inclination to tell his own story. He has expressed his views on practically everything, and in two volumes of autobiography has revealed those aspects of his private life he regards as properly in the public domain. What justification is there then for a raw apprentice to pass judgment on a master craftsman, to take the measure of a skill I admire but cannot emulate, and perhaps cavalierly to recast the boundary between private life and public curiosity?

Beyond pointing out that there has been no assessment of Muggeridge's life and writing except his own and that biography and *auto*biography are two very different things, I concede that I have no wholly satisfactory answer. What I can say is that almost from the first occasion when I became interested in Malcolm Muggeridge and his, to me, startling and illuminating views, I decided at some time I must write about him, even if only for the therapeutic purpose of sorting out why I find him so intriguing. For several years I tracked down his early articles and out-of-print books. A selection of these were published in *Things Past* in 1978, an anthology with a discernibly biographical strain. Even so, I was dissatisfied; all very well to search out what Muggeridge has thought and written about himself, but what do I think of the man and his life?

Motivation and opportunity combined when Muggeridge and I decided to swap houses so that I could spend a sabbatical year at his beloved Park Cottage in Sussex, while he fulfilled a rash commitment to be a teaching visitor in the School of Journalism at Western University in Canada. So, for a year, I sat in his study, surrounded by his books and those few mementoes he keeps—the most treasured, I should

Copyrighted material

guess, a faded picture of Hugh Kingsmill, his arms pumping as he strode along for one of those leisurely afternoons of talk and laughter that Muggeridge once called "half the joy of living." Day after day, I looked out across the yard and garden, away to the rolling Sussex countryside flecked with sheep, or I tramped through the adjacent hop fields over which I had temporarily inherited his special walking rights, and pondered Malcolm Muggeridge, a strange man and his strange, compelling views. This book is the result.

It is customary to conclude by acknowledging that all errors are one's own and all virtues the legacy of those who assisted. The former acknowledgement I readily make—and ask absolution in advance.

I benefited enormously from the advice and assistance of Gordon Blelloch, Christopher Booker, Jeremy Murray-Brown, Peter Chafer, Pat Ferns, Michael Holroyd, Leslie Illingworth, Richard Ingrams, Lord and Lady Longford, and Douglas, Eric, Jack, Leonard, John, and Anne Muggeridge. Dr. Alec Vidler deserves separate mention, for without his encouragement, I would have lacked the courage to begin and the perseverance to complete this book. Joyce Coghill once again prepared a manuscript for me with unfailing skill and dedication.

My greatest debt is to the one who is the subject of these labors.

Ian Hunter
London, Ontario
1979

Copyrighted material

·1·
STRANGER

The first thing I remember about the world—and I pray it may be the last—is that I was a stranger in it. This feeling, which everyone has in some degree, and which is, at once, the glory and the desolation of homo sapiens, *provides the only thread of consistency that I can detect in my life.*

Malcolm Muggeridge, *Apologia pro vita sua*, 1968

* * *

"Mr. Muggeridge is a writer of merit, his writing being characterized by a persuasive eloquence, apt quotation, and illuminating bursts of humour."

This would be an apt description of Malcolm Muggeridge. It is, however, a description of his father, Henry Thomas Muggeridge, from the *Croydon Advertiser* of 1930. No other influence, at least in his early years, was half as significant as that of his father. Self-taught, restless, dogmatic, demanding, zealous, resilient—all these qualities of H. T. Muggeridge are reflected in his son.

Henry Thomas Muggeridge was born in Croydon on June 28, 1864, the eldest son in a large family. Malcolm's grandfather, Henry Ambrose Muggeridge, was an undertaker who deserted his family when H. T. was twelve years old. His grandmother supported them from the meager earnings of a second-hand furniture shop on the High Street, Penge. To make ends meet, H. T. was obliged to leave school and go to work. Among his papers is a faded card.

> Penge National Schools: This is to certify that H. Muggeridge has attended the above schools 377 times during the year ending April 30, 1878; and that he passed a satisfactory examination before Her Majesty's Inspector in the VII Standard.
>
> Rev. D. McAnally, Vicar

Copyrighted material

It was the only diploma H. T. would ever receive. From the age of thirteen, he once told Malcolm, he always had people dependent on him. He seldom complained, though, because he said that a man who becomes conscious of a past injustice is apt to be conscious of little else.

H. T. started work as an office boy at MacIntyre, Hogg, Marsh and Company, a London firm of shirt manufacturers. Unlike Malcolm, who has kicked in the teeth practically every employer with whom he has been associated, his father loyally remained with the shirt firm until his retirement, finishing up with the title of company secretary. His duties consisted of what today would be considered accounting, and these he performed hunched over a rolltop desk covered with a black oilcloth, seated on a tall stool in an office sealed off by glass partitions from the surrounding litter of picked over shirt boxes. His handwriting was small and perfectly formed, and he would write his entries in the ledger so that anyone could read them; when he made a mistake, he would painstakingly eliminate the blot using a specially sharpened penknife to scratch it out. When he had filled one ledger he began another, and the old ledger was stored away in a safe, standing next to other ledgers until, after a prescribed number of years, it was taken out and sold as waste paper or used as wrapping paper for shirt boxes.

Each morning H. T. set out by train for the office on New Basinghall Street. At that time the office was still equipped with a uniformed commissionaire who, like Saint Peter, could grant or deny admission at the gates. In the evening he would return on the 6:05, London Bridge to Croydon East, where young Malcolm would often wait, like any expectant son anxious lest his father not show up, then rushing forward at the first glimpse of the familiar face: "There is no face except Kitty's that I have ever picked out with such joyous relief as his, leading the field up the slope from the arrival platform. . . ."[1]

H. T. was a small man (which he attributed to being undernourished as a child) with a large, bulbous nose (which all his sons have inherited), and a goatee and whiskers, sometimes neatly clipped, at other times tending to be scrubby and unkempt. He was certainly not a handsome man, yet distinctive, with a face of character rather than beauty.

Malcolm's mother, Annie Booler, came from Sheffield, one of the younger children in a large, working-class family. She was two years younger than her husband whom she met on holidays on the Isle of Man. They were married in 1883, and their union was to prove lasting and relatively tranquil. H. T. was not an impulsive man; he studied and weighed alternatives carefully before arriving at a considered decision, and presumably marriage was no exception. Once having committed

Copyrighted material

himself, he exhibited dogged fidelity—to his wife, to his employer, to his principles.

His political activities necessitated frequent evenings away from home, and Annie occasionally harbored dark suspicions as to his whereabouts and doings. There is no evidence to suggest that her suspicions were in any way justified. Certainly, H. T. had a sensual disposition, something he passed on to his sons, and one that may well have craved satisfaction outside of marriage. But since he never forgave his own father for the womanizing that had contributed to the breakup of his parents' marriage, it is most unlikely that he similarly put his own marriage at risk. Also, he was a man of iron self-discipline. What his wife really resented was that he had a fuller life than she—attending meetings, debating, dining out with influential people—while she was housebound.

Nevertheless, her doubts remained and led to bitter recriminations; also, she developed an elaborate belief that a neighbor's maid was habitually disporting herself in an attic window so as to divert H. T.'s attention from his gardening to the more intriguing parts of her anatomy. So real did this notion become that Annie would flit about from window to window, peering out from behind the curtains, trying to catch the seductress *engagé*.

Despite such minor strains, the marriage wore time well. As youthful passions cooled, both found that unconscious familiarity in each other's company that is the key to all enduring unions. Undoubtedly in tribute to Annie, H. T. copied into his diary some words written by a blind German naturalist named Huber who had rejoiced in his blindness because it demonstrated to him the depths of his wife's love: ". . . to me my wife is always young, fresh, and pretty, which is no light matter."

For her part, Annie was just the kind of wife H. T. needed. Her qualities exactly complemented his. She was practical; he was theoretical and idealistic. He would set right social systems and nations; she would solve the problems of a bustling household. She liked to look after him, taking care to see that he wore the right thickness of underwear at different seasons, that his black coat was clean and brushed when he set off for the city, and that his socks and shirts were properly darned. Also, she imparted a measure of order to his life that the demands of political causes would have otherwise precluded.

H. T. occasionally spoke of Annie in a patronizing way, which, in light of her loyalty to him, was unfortunate. In a letter to an acquaintance in 1926, he wrote: "Annie is still living in the world of simple love for those who the Great Father has given her. She has no introspections, no doubts, no ambitions—except perhaps still to look beautiful, and is,

Copyrighted material

I think, to be envied."[2] When, in his fifties, he took up bowls, she would go along to the recreation ground each Saturday afternoon and there pass the hours knitting until it came time to return. She was with him when he died in 1942. Annie lived on for twelve years but never fully adjusted to life without him. "The bed in which they had slept side by side through so many nights had two hollows in it; with the other unoccupied, my mother lay disconsolately in hers."[3]

From early youth, H. T. was attracted to politics, not, it appears, through any self-serving ambition to exercise power, but because he was genuinely sympathetic to human suffering and anxious to alleviate it. For a brief time he was associated with the Liberal party, typically in a campaign to obtain a free borough library. Libraries meant education, and to him education was man's great hope for the future, a way to civilize base instincts and elevate one's vision. As a young man, H. T. belonged to what was called a Mutual Improvement Society, as well as to a literary and debating club connected with a Baptist chapel. He defined education as "everything that helps to appreciate truth, beauty and goodness," and he labored continuously to educate himself, reading voraciously, and teaching himself French and music. He had little innate musical aptitude; he just bashed away at the piano determinedly, more often than not playing "The Flying Dutchman," which had some unexplained attraction for him, his eyes riveted on the sheet music and his pipe clenched firmly between his teeth. For seventeen years he served on a Labour party adult education committee, and he was involved in the affairs of Ruskin Hall, an adult education center in Croydon. Had he lived, he could well have become one of the Labour peers his son never misses an opportunity to lampoon, appearing on some earnest television panel to advocate "not just more, but *better* education" as the answer to all of society's ills. What, one wonders, would H. T. make of a visit to a burgeoning campus today, with its degree programs in astrology, sport, film, and dance, and its students found not in the library but grouped intently around pinball machines in the recreation center?

By 1882, H. T. had become a Socialist, a member of the Fabian Society and, later, of the International Labour party. From then on so much of his time was devoted to political activities that he would frequently remark how he earned his living in a fit of abstraction of mind. In his diary he noted Ben Franklin's observation that leisure was the time for doing something useful. MacIntyre, Hogg, Marsh, et al, good Tories to a man, would undoubtedly have sacked him had he not proved so conscientious and valuable an employee. As it was, political involvements were later to cost him a seat on the company's board of directors.

H. T. practiced socialism as well as preached it. He was always fair

Copyrighted material

game for a hard luck story, ready to dig into his pocket and help out. This fact alone distinguished him from some of his more affluent Fabian friends whose commitment to melioration stopped short of personal charity. He lived abstemiously and exhibited little interest in acquiring possessions or wealth—not that he could have acquired them had he wanted to since his income never reached £1000 per year. "In a world given over to the worship of money" he would say with a wry smile, "I am an infidel." Still, the family lived adequately on his unlavish but steady income.

H. T. had a strong element of Don Quixote in his makeup, something he passed on to all his sons, but most notably to Malcolm. He always identified with the underdog and was liable to mount a forlorn campaign on behalf of some issue or cause already hopelessly lost. Too shrewd to be a simple do-gooder, not exactly naive (he liked to quote Ignazio Silone's observation that credulity is the only raw material that no country need import), he was a curious mixture of qualities; selfless, loyal, and honest, yet somehow deluded by the vanity of ideas—a vanity even more dangerous than that of the ego. Theories that did not correspond with reality rattled about in his head; facts he had mastered, but not truth; literature he had read, often patiently committed to memory, but not comprehended; good causes and goodness were not distinguished; he was a man who saw with, not through, the eye and, as William Blake said must inevitably happen, thus came to believe in lies.

Debate was one of his favorite activities, and he excelled at it. Remembering H. T. in his prime, a retired vicar wrote: "I used to listen spellbound as the argument went to and fro between Mr. Muggeridge and his tormenting opponents. I did not understand a word of the political theory he enunciated, but I was fascinated by his words."[4] He was uncowed by being unpopular, always ready to mutiny against what John Stuart Mill (one of his favorite authors) called "the tyranny of prevailing opinion," or in contemporary jargon "the consensus." From a soapbox he would declaim unfashionable views, most notably his pro-Boer advocacy that on one occasion at Duppas Hill led to his being physically assaulted by the enraged audience so that he finally had to be rescued by police. Of all the qualities that Malcolm inherited from his father, it was iconoclasm, this willingness to swim against the tide, that was most significant. There were few things in life more intrinsically abhorrent to father or to son than to find themselves in agreement with the majority of their fellow human beings.

It was more as an imparter of ideas, a teacher rather than a father, that H. T. affected his sons. He read to them when they were children, and as they grew older, he encouraged them to read and think and express

Copyrighted material

their thoughts; but he was too preoccupied with campaigns and political stratagems to be a close personal presence in their lives. He kept up a hectic pace of activities and was given to wistfully quoting Matthew Arnold's lines about

> ". . . that lull in the hot race,
> Wherein he doth forever chase
> That flying and elusive shadow, rest."

He was never close enough to his sons, at least to Malcolm, to be looked on as a confidant, someone to be gone to with intimate, personal difficulties. For example, he never discussed with any of his boys what in those days were decorously called the "facts of life"; not that he wouldn't have done so had they asked, but his mind was preoccupied with other matters, his attention otherwise engaged. Those who traffic in universal betterment frequently overlook requirements and concerns of individuals, even of their own offspring. So, while H. T. introduced Malcolm to literature and ideas, and in his disdain for public opinion could be said to have served as an early role model, he had only a minimal effect on Malcolm's developing character and morals. The father shaped the boy's ideas but not his temperament. Malcolm loved his father and respected his integrity, tenacity, and lack of malice—this comes through clearly in his memoirs. But there is scant evidence of much real intimacy or tenderness between them.

It was left largely to his mother to supply sustenance, physical and emotional. Physical sustenance took the form of "good grub" that she believed, with implacable conviction, produced strong, healthy, and decent boys. She ran a frugal household with a firm, fair hand, brooking little interference; and she retained control even after the boys had grown up and left home. On a vacation from Cambridge, Malcolm complained to a friend: "If I put my legs on a chair, I get ticked off by my mater, if I drop tobacco ash, I ditto—I think you lose half the joy of smoking if you use an ash tray, don't you?"[5]

Annie was not a demonstrative woman, nor did she articulate her love. Her sons had to derive emotional sustenance simply from her presence. She was always there, white-haired and benign. The home environment was overwhelmingly masculine, yet she never made the mistake so many women thus situated do of trying to feign masculine interests in order to be closer to her children. Instead she remained aloof, able to praise, reprove, or chastise equally. Actually, because of her husband's frequent absences, physical discipline fell more and more to her eldest son, Douglas, whose lenient disposition ill-suited him to this task.

Copyrighted material

Thomas Malcolm Muggeridge ("my impossible name") was the third son, born on March 24, 1903. His parents were slightly disappointed that their hopes for a daughter had been dashed again. Malcolm's birth coincided with the appearance of George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*, and H. T. liked to say that he had edited the publication of a superman.

At three months, Malcolm won his first and only beauty prize in a contest sponsored by Mellins' baby foods. The transition from cherub to *enfant terrible* was gradual. Exceptional promise must have been evident early; on September 21, 1905, H. T. wrote to his brother, Percy: "I have now three youngsters. Little Malcolm, who is now two and a half, is the youngest and we think the most promising of them all."

Two more sons followed, and the presence of five brothers ensured a competitive, rambunctious environment; "those dreadful Muggeridge boys" they were called in the neighborhood. Ingenuity and thrift were two qualities Malcolm exhibited early on, both likely to have been derived from his mother. His brother, Stanley, once offered him five shillings to walk on his hands and knees from The Red Lion to The White Horse, two Croydon pubs about a quarter of a mile apart. On all fours, Malcolm crawled along so convincingly pretending to be looking for a lost coin that he not only won the bet but quite failed to excite any curiosity. On another occasion, he accompanied two of his brothers on a boating expedition. After a picnic and a lazy afternoon, he tried to shove off and, in the process, fell in the water soaking his clothes. His brothers undressed him, wrapped him in the picnic blanket, and gave him ten shillings (a great sum to them) to go home by taxi. On arrival at the railway station, they were astonished to find Malcolm waiting—still occasionally dripping under the blanket and perfectly content to incur public stares to make ten shillings. His brothers chose separate seats on the train and exhibited no fraternal ties, but they were sporting enough to allow him to keep the money.

Few things are more tedious and exasperating than biographies that construct elaborate theoretical edifices on trivial childhood foundations. Yet both of these incidents illustrate, in a small way, Malcolm's iconoclasm, his independent mind, and his willingness to look silly in order to attain a desired end. He has always been ready to play the fool. In one of his first published articles, he pleaded for a return to the Feast of Fools that the medieval church celebrated.[6] (It is often forgotten that Shakespeare's fools not only have the best lines but usually exhibit greater wisdom than all other players. It is the clown who brings the curtain down; a Cervantes, not a Rousseau or Marx or Freud, who writes the last chapter.)

Malcolm's earliest childhood memory is of feeling estranged, of

Copyrighted material

being a stranger, a sojourner rather than a citizen in the world. Psychologists might fish about for explanations based on maternal deprivation or peer rejection or whatever, but these strivings for meaning are mostly nonsense. Such a feeling is not uncommon among those of spiritual temperament—those who feel, often from a very early age, that here we have no continuing city.

> Just walking along the road we lived in when I was a child, I would find myself wondering, with a poignancy I find it difficult now to convey, who I was and how I came to be in that place. As though it were a foreign land and I a stranger, knowing no one and unable to speak the language.[7]

There has always been a theatrical side to Muggeridge. He is a ham, sometimes unconsciously. As a boy, he and his brothers enjoyed acting. They frequently staged plays, or important scenes from a play, devising props from whatever a suburban Croydon home would yield. The audience consisted of parents and those neighbors that could be readily dragooned. Malcolm particularly enjoyed playing ghosts, delivering whatever lines ghosts have with considerable conviction and gusto. Once, playing Banquo's ghost, the performance was cut short by his mother's insistence that he immediately return her best white sheet to its proper place. At school he was active in the drama club and is remembered for a spirited performance as Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*.

He has written of a recurrent dream in which he is on stage when, to his horror, he realizes that he has learned the lines from a different play. As the audience begins to hiss and shout, he freezes and can think of nothing to do but to go on speaking the only lines he knows. The theatrical motif of this little parable is revealing. Fifty years after his ghost performances, Jonathan Miller cast Muggeridge as the Gryphon in a television version of *Alice in Wonderland*, leading Geoffrey Moorhouse, *The Guardian's* theater critic, to write: "Mr. Muggeridge's whole life has been leading up to the evening when he would dance a dab-toed quadrille before a carefully prepared audience, against a sky of gathering gloom."[8]

His first school, just around the corner from the Muggeridge home, was run by two sisters (fittingly named Monday) who endeavored, without much success except in letters, to inculcate the rudiments of knowledge. At mathematics, he was particularly hopeless. "An inability to apply myself to anything which did not interest me manifested itself at an early stage, and has, alas, never been overcome."

At the age of twelve, he won a scholarship to the Borough Secondary School (later to become Selhurst Grammar School). The examiner was

Copyrighted material

the local inspector of schools, a Scotsman with a large mane of white hair. Malcolm was full of righteous indignation when word began to filter back that his success in the scholarship examination was attributable to the inspector's desire to ingratiate himself with H. T., then a Labour councillor and an active member of the local education committee. "I hope this malignant suggestion was baseless, but honesty compels me to admit that this was the only examination in which I ever achieved any success."[9]

At Selhurst he excelled in English but little else. His extracurricular activities involved drama and the debating club, and he was a Sergeant-Major in the cadet corps. One contemporary recalled him as "a bit of a chump"; another as ". . . an odd fellow . . . an emotional person and frightfully excitable"; yet another as "very verbose and self-assured . . . He certainly loved the limelight."[10] A common memory was of the headmaster wearily repeating, "That will be quite enough from you, Muggeridge. Be *quiet*, Muggeridge. Sit *down*, Muggeridge."

Few families escaped the disruption of 1914. Against their father's wishes, Malcolm's two older brothers joined up. He was too young to participate but old enough to feel keen disappointment at missing out on the grand adventure. As it happened, his chance was still to come. For now, he endured the local elementary and secondary schools with benign indifference. Half a century later, in the course of making a BBC film about his childhood, he visibly disconcerted the headmaster at his old school by telling the students: "School in my day was a place to get away from as soon as possible and for as long as possible. Everything exciting, mysterious, adventurous, happened outside its confines, not within them."[11]

What he learned that mattered came from his father and from his own reading and writing. Words were his passion. "There was nothing else I ever wanted to do except use them, no other accomplishment or achievement I ever had the slightest regard for, or desire to emulate. I have always loved words, and still love them, for their own sake. For the power and beauty of them; for the wonderful things that can be done with them."[12] On his eighth birthday, he had received a toy printing set that he put to immediate use. His very first story is no longer extant, but he has recalled it.

> It was a story of a train going along very fast and, to the satisfaction of the passengers, racing through the small stations along the track without stopping. Their satisfaction, however, turned to dismay, and then to panic fury, as it dawned on them that it was not going to stop at *their* station either when it came to them. They raged and shouted and shook their fists,

Copyrighted material

> but all to no avail. The train went roaring on. At the time I had no notion what, if anything, the story signified. It just came into my mind, and the rubber letters dropped into place of themselves. Yet, as I came to see it, and see now more clearly than ever, it is the story I have been writing ever since; the story of our time.[13]

Of all his childhood experiences, none made a more vivid or lasting impression than those occasions when he accompanied his father to a market in Surrey Street where H. T. would mount a soapbox and, against a gathering night sky, preach socialism to a shifting, disinterested crowd of passersby. Standing thus alone and isolated, his father seemed a heroic figure; his voice that of a prophet calling the people to cast off the economic chains that held them in servitude to property and capital and to venture forward to a land of milk and honey. Laughing at his jokes ("the government says it is interested in ships; well I am interested in ships, too—*hardships*"), applauding his witty repartee, intoxicated by his oratory, Malcolm could almost glimpse the New Jerusalem which would be ushered in by nationalization, cooperatives, equitable taxation, and local grants for housing, health, and the safety of school children.

The Muggeridge home, at 17 Birdhurst Gardens, was a frequent meeting place for the socialist intelligentsia of the day. Ramsay MacDonald came on occasion, as did Philip Snowden, Hugh Dalton, the ineffable Webbs, and, once, H. G. Wells. There they would gather, the men lighting up pipes, the women smoothing down their skirts or hitching up their trousers, and after clearing their high-pitched, reedy voices, they would proceed self-assuredly to set the world aright. For H. T. these were golden moments, talking things over in a civilized way with what were, to him, the finest flowers of his generation. Even when they occasionally treated H. T. condescendingly (as when, after Malcolm married her niece, Beatrice Webb wrote to her sister that H. T. was "a very worthy person, though of modest means"), well, that was a small price to pay for consorting in such company. To Malcolm it seemed that H. T. lacked a certain dignity, became a bit servile on those occasions; looking back, he attributed this to a kind of "raw sincerity" that prevented H. T., unlike most of the others, from later "selling out to the Establishment."[14]

Curled up on a corner divan that was covered in red damask, Malcolm would remain mute, fearful of being sent off to bed. Immobile, avoiding attention, but what passions seethed within him! Like an impressionable novitiate stumbling upon venerable fathers speaking in tongues, he listened with a kind of reverential awe to the babble of voices, the dialectical logic, the irresistible conclusions, the glorious

Copyrighted material

visions. This was life and learning. He accepted, with unquestioning faith, the picture of a humane, equalitarian society based on communal service rather than individual greed—to be brought about by these very people seated in his own living room and supported by all men of intelligence and goodwill who would hearken to their call. Great names invoked: Plato ("Of course, my dear Jordan, what is the *Republic* but an early socialist blueprint . . ."), Ruskin, Tawney, William Morris, Edward Bellamy; it might even be Jesus, but always as a rebel, a champion of the downtrodden and oppressed, a friend of the poor, and an enemy of the money changers. The talk would go on all evening, often into the early hours of the morning. If H. T. happened to inject a good line, it was a special thrill. When his guests had gone and Malcolm had long since been discovered and sent to bed, H. T. would carefully preserve his contribution in his diary, writing with his fastidious handwriting and carefully dating the entry: "The Conservative is very useful—when you have brought about fundamental reforms, he takes care of them for you. Self. 8.7.26." Through it all Annie would knit, or just doze in her folding chair, now and then jerking awake to make some incongruous remark; as once when H. T. had demonstrated how a new social program would cost only half a crown on taxation, she suddenly came to and blurted out: "Yes, and you owe me half a crown for the greengrocer."

H. T. professed to be an atheist, but really he was a born believer. His creed was socialism. Just beneath the surface, away from public scrutiny, ran currents of religious belief as well. He came from the chapel and believed in God, at least in the sense of an animating spirit behind the universe. His diary contains numerous illustrations of this. One entry, on February 22, 1928, manages to ally God with his resentment at private property; he had been walking at Reigate Hill when he saw a plaque explaining that walkers were indebted to Sir Jeremiah Coleman for permission to walk through these grounds: "Indebted to Jeremiah Coleman, not to God. Had that worthy chosen he could, of course, have put a high wall around it and reserved the beautiful view for himself or for those to whom he chose to sell the land. Sir Jeremiah Coleman thus stands between men and their creator. . . . While I wrote this a robin redbreast, with the utmost assurance, came and sat beside me. He looked out of the corner of his sharp eye at me with curiosity and friendliness as though he would like to talk about the scene. He, at least, had no intermediary between him and the enjoyment of God's work."

As he got older, H. T.'s references to God became more personal. He also appeared to have developed a notion of accountability and judgment for one's earthly activities. Paradoxically, however, he remained

Copyrighted material

skeptical about immortality: "How can I square the idea of personal immortality with my knowledge of myself?" he wrote.

Just how long Malcolm's belief in socialism lasted is difficult to say. In some of his Cambridge letters he calls himself a radical socialist or "temporary Bolshie," but in others there are undertones of skepticism about all political ideology. After his disillusionment in Russia, he wrote articles that appealed strongly to conservatives, and he was frequently labelled a "neo-conservative" (once by as astute a critic as George Orwell). Still, he had not completely discarded the socialist nostrums he had first heard from his father's soapbox. As late as 1958, *The New Statesman* called him "a man without a faith" but added ". . . on occasion he is capable of outlining a revolutionary programme for the British Labour Party with the wistful air of one who, in different circumstances, would not mind helping to foster it."[15]

Father and son shared a love of getting out of the city to the countryside, bicycling or hiking. It was while cycling that Malcolm had his first conscious, mystical experience.

> I can remember the occasion perfectly. . . . The light of the setting sun slashed the trunks of the trees, so that they were half gilded and half in shadow. Suddenly I realized with a tremendous feeling of exultation that this golden light of the sun, this fragrance of a June evening and light rustle of leaves—the whole glorious scene had some special significance in which I participated. That in its all-embracing beauty it conveyed a oneness, and that to identify oneself with this oneness, and with the spirit animating it and giving it meaning, contained the promise of ecstasy. It was a moment of great illumination. . . . I will not pretend that, bicycling with my father and brothers near Chipstead Church, all, or any, of this came into my mind. At the same time, it marked a sort of turning point; thenceforth wherever I have been, and however dismal my situation or prospect, there has been the never-failing solace of feeling earth below my feet and seeing sky above my head.[16]

Whether this illumination was communicated to his father and brothers, and what their reactions to it might have been, is not recorded. His father might not have been unduly surprised, for such excursions were times of particularly sharp and vivid insight for him too. The incident at Reigate Hill has already been mentioned; even more revealing of H. T.'s dark side is this entry written in his diary while hiking near Chelsham Church on February 24, 1928:

> The sun is glorious; the spot secluded, the birds hail spring, and my heart ought to rejoice. But it doesn't—there is a weight of defeat resting upon it. Mortification arising from self-failure has no such solace as

Copyrighted material

bereavement has. There is a dignity and completeness about the dead that the living can never even try to reach without being ridiculous. Life is too jagged and crude—too littered with half tried out ideals—it shows us to be means ill-adjusted to ends (except the everlasting reproduction of our imperfect selves) to achieve the rounded wholeness of the dead. Their quiet superiority hurts me.

This bout of depression proved temporary; not only did H. T. continue to be active in municipal politics but, within a year, he was elected as Labour member of parliament for Romford, running on the slogan: "Stand for TRUTH and vote for MUGGERIDGE." In four previous attempts, he had always been defeated by Conservative candidates. At last he had a parliamentary platform from which to declaim. Among the many congratulatory telegrams and letters was one from MacIntyre, Hogg and Marsh expressing pleasure that ". . . You have attained your heart's desire and achieved the result you set out to achieve so many years past." There may even have been a faint sigh of relief on New Basinghall Street now that the company's accounts would be tended by someone whose attention was not forever elsewhere. In any case, amicable arrangements for a leave of absence were made. His moment at last.

H. T. cherished his new initials—M. P. He put them after his name on all correspondence. In the House of Commons, he fought for the removal of "unsightly and malodorous" municipal dumps, raising the school leaving age, and electrification of railways to eliminate ". . . the tortures of the damned in steam trains in which commuters are packed like herrings." He also was instrumental in the passing of the Silicosis and Asbestos Act of 1930.

But his glory was short-lived. Two years later, in October 1931, another election was called. H. T. campaigned hard, even printing and circulating a quaint letter addressed "To the Electors" from his wife; since she barely could write, it is likely that this letter was composed by Malcolm, and it does, in fact, bear some stylistic evidence of his hand.

We have been married for over thirty years, and I have four boys, of whom I am, of course, like all mothers, very proud. My husband has always worked hard for the Labour and Socialist movement. Sometimes, like wives of most public men, I have felt it hard that he had to be so much away from his home, but when I have thought of the work he has done or tried to do for those who suffer from our unjust poverty, I have been reconciled to his absence. . . .

I can only tell you that he is a man who believes what he says, and practises what he preaches. I have found out that the moving spirit of his life is sympathy with the poor, whom he looks upon as the victims of a

Copyrighted material

> wrong system of society. I am quite sure, after forty years study of him and his ways, that he will never alter in this respect, and that is why I thought I should like to write to you this simple letter, asking you to use your utmost efforts to get him returned at this election.[17]

Despite his and Annie's best efforts, the tide was running against Labour; H. T. lost badly to a Conservative, W.G.D. Hutchinson. He returned to municipal politics, but his spirit was broken, perhaps less from electoral defeat than from seeing measures he had advocated with such conviction turn sour: nationalization, which he used to call "preventative medicine against the ills of capitalism," leading to more inefficiencies and work stoppages; education producing greater and greater illiteracy and gullibility; justice appealed for but injustice enshrined; higher taxation resulting in greater inequality; freedoms demanded, but new servitudes coming to pass; world peace—a complete illusion. Several diary entries from his later years express a kind of baffled frustration. Also, death begins to appear as a theme of his reflections, occasionally as a premonition; he quoted Pascal: "I know I shall die, but I don't believe it." Although he retained a sense of humor and never became morbid ("If ever I suddenly find myself entering the portal of Heaven, I am sure I should feel there is a catch on it"), his election defeat ended his illusions. At the age of seventy-two, three years before his death, he wrote: "I know at last I am what I am, and not what I have always wanted to be." Perhaps there was more solace in such hard-won self-knowledge than in the grander Utopian dreams of his prime.

At the age of seventeen, Malcolm fell in love. From the moment he met Dora Pitman on a municipal tennis court ". . .the whole of existence for me was concentrated on that one face, uniquely beautiful, as it seemed, and distinct from all other faces."[18] Most of his leisure hours were now spent with her, playing tennis, or going to and from her home in Thornton Heath. In July 1921, he wrote to a friend: "Am fearfully in love with a charming little girl named Dora—she has simply wonderful eyes and writes poetry."[19]

His memoirs are reticent about their physical relationship: "There were, of course, quarrels and angry partings; we exasperated one another with the sexual urges we mutually aroused, and then only partially and inadequately, or not at all, satisfied."[20] Emotionally, the relationship was intense and lasted for several years; in a letter from India in 1926, Malcolm talked vaguely of returning to England and marrying Dora.

Copyrighted material

Dora inspired his first literary efforts that have survived—love poems. Few writers would choose to be judged by posterity on their adolescent love poetry, and Muggeridge is no exception. At the time he had a vain regard for his verse and considered himself a discriminating judge; when his friend, Alec Vidler, showed him some of his own compositions, Malcolm read them over and then gravely suggested that Vidler stick to prose. Good advice, it turned out, for both of them.

Perhaps mercifully, most of the poetry written to Dora has disappeared. One poem has survived, a penance for using it satirically in *Three Flats*, a play he wrote after his intimacy with Dora was over. Miss Edwards, the Dora of the play, says of the poet: "Oh, he's a dear, but little and old and vague. He writes poems to me and he's romantic. That's why I like him. It's something to have poems written to you even if they're bad ones. So I keep them and sometimes read them over just to cheer myself up."

Come, let us sleep, beloved, and not waste,
Our time in idle passion;
There are a thousand star-lit nights to taste
Our loves in wild flesh fashion.

Tonight we'll lie like children after play—
Sprawling in careless grace;
Your nightdress all in ribbon'd disarray
Hair uncomb'd round your face.

My man arm loosely thrown across your breast
Your soft one neath my head—
Abandon'd to the gentle dreamless rest
Of a pure passionless bed.

But when you lean'd towards me from far away
I quite forgot all this,
And all the words that I had thought to say
Spoke through one single kiss.

Exactly how the romance with Dora ended is not clear. Muggeridge's memoirs say nothing whatever on the subject. By 1924 he had met Kitty Dobbs, whom he was to marry in 1927. Yet she cannot have immediately captured his affections because Dora continues to figure prominently in his correspondence from India (not always favorably—one letter refers to her "slobbering kisses") while Kitty is never once mentioned. Yet he had scarcely returned from India when his engagement to Kitty was announced.

Copyrighted material

By chance he met Dora once again years later in an underground shelter during the blitz. He was now a father of four (she had been twice married), and they huddled there side by side, through the night ". . . while outside the world in which we had been youthful lovers crashed and shook and burnt about us."

H. T. longed for Malcolm to become an educated, self-assured, debonair Socialist—to be all that he had hoped to be had fate not driven him out to work at thirteen. To achieve this, no sacrifice was too much. So, despite a desultory academic record at Selhurst Grammar School, Malcolm went up to Selwyn College, Cambridge, in October 1920.

Copyrighted material

·2·
CAMBRIDGE

The great advantage of the sort of education I had was that it made practically no mark upon those subjected to it.

Malcolm Muggeridge, *The Spectator*, May 13, 1960

* * *

Selwyn College was of comparatively recent origin, founded in 1882, and named in honor of a church dignitary, George Augustus Selwyn. In Muggeridge's time, it had more compulsory chapels than the other Cambridge colleges, but there is no record of Malcolm voicing any objection to this. Selwyn's accommodations and amenities were intended to be austere so as to be within the range of less affluent parents.

Malcolm read natural science, a disastrous choice of subject in which he had no interest then or since. To his fellow undergraduates, he liked to explain this curious choice by saying that he believed that the practical and realistic side of his nature needed strengthening, thereby managing to leave the implication that for him to read classics or modern literature would have been superfluous or, at least, too easy. Actually, his real reason for choosing the natural science tripos was that science was the only postmatriculation subject provided at Selhurst, and at first he did not realize that one could take up a different subject at university. By the time he did realize it, he was too embarrassed to switch.

His memoirs portray Cambridge as a place of tedium and melancholy. He claims to have loathed the university's pretentiousness, the subservience of juniors to seniors, and the torpor and vague decadence of the place. "For me the years at Cambridge were the most futile and dismal of my life."

There can be little doubt that this is how he now recalls Cambridge. Equally, there can be no doubt that this is *not* how he felt at the time.

Copyrighted material

His letters prove this. They are full of the bustle and gaiety typical of an undergraduate living away from home for the first time: ". . . I had a very good time at the Varsity sports . . . probably even you don't realize what my stay at Selwyn has done for me . . . the boat race was topping too . . . the teaching is going quite well; I love every bit of it . . . It's so jolly hard when one loves the College and the people in it to be able to do nothing for the College. . . ." All of these quotations are from letters he wrote in his freshman year; letters from later years tend to deal with weightier topics, but they contain little evidence that his enthusiasm had palled, or that Cambridge had become a dreary place.

Why are his memoirs so at variance with his letters from the time? There are two probable explanations. First, Muggeridge disdains pedantic research and scholarship: "Truth, not facts, dear boy" is one of his favorite axioms. In writing his memoirs he ran to form and consulted few letters or documents, even those in his own possession. Nor did he bother to check his recollection against other people's memories. Second, and more important, his memoirs reveal how he *now* thinks of those days, how he wants to remember himself. Reality has occasionally been bent to conform with predisposition. Today he feels disaffected from what he was then, and his disaffection, projected back, has produced a misleading, or at least an incomplete, picture. Was he not a municipal schoolboy? Then he *should* have been uneasy surrounded by the cream of the public schools. Was he not a socialist? Surely his conscience rebelled to hear a Cambridge degree described by the dean in his welcoming address as a kind of insurance policy against the economic ups and downs that beset the working classes. Old traditions should have seemed spurious; juvenile pursuits should have occasioned despair, or at least boredom.

One event that did leave an indelible impression upon him during his Cambridge years was the death of his brother, Stanley. Stanley had been in the Royal Flying Corps during the war and afterwards had continued working at the Croydon airfield. On August 19, 1922, he was struck by a petrol truck while riding his motorcycle to work. Malcolm and his father rushed to Croydon hospital and were with him when he died. Three days later Malcolm wrote to a friend, "My brother Stanley was killed in a motor accident on Saturday, three minutes after leaving home. I rejoice for him—he has left all the baseness and limitations of his body and has found a true and infinite peace. God bless him. The tragedy of death is the mother's and sweetheart's that are left behind. Dearest Alec, I have grown up."[1]

It was this tragedy that prompted him to think about death. Henceforth, death was never to be far from his mind. It became a theme—one might even say a preoccupation—in much of his writing. His first

Copyrighted material

published short story (in *The New Statesman* in 1928) is about Alfred Twisted, an elderly schoolmaster who has just retired after forty years' service. He is free at last; free from chattering, inattentive students; free from doting and inquisitive parents; free from assemblies, chaperoning, and the infinite tedium of repetitive lessons. The story ends:

> Mr. Twisted was in the habit of getting up in the morning to make an early cup of tea. His wife smiled when she noticed that the next morning he did not stir, remembering how unnecessary it was now for him to be up in good time. Then she saw something peculiar in the way he was lying, and touched him and found him cold and began to cry quietly; for he was dead.[2]

When, in 1978, Muggeridge made a television film about his life, he acknowledged: "From my earliest years I have been much given to thinking about death, some would say abnormally, or even morbidly so."[3] The death of a brother in his youth, and of a son in middle age, contributed to this; as an old man, he has needed little external prompting to ruminate on death.

Death is the only transcendent and yet universal experience; some might contend for birth or love, but the mind is too embryonic to be aware of the former and too temporarily deranged to make sense of the latter. It is not surprising that Muggeridge should have thought about death, but it is rare for a writer to use it as a recurrent theme, particularly today when death has replaced sex as our dirty little secret.

When Muggeridge says, with Keats, that he has been for many a year "half in love with easeful death" he is often accused of morbidity. Actually, to be in love with death means to see the limitations of life and to long to break free of them. To love life one must also love death, because death is life's fulfillment. Those who see only life's phenomena cling to life like a miser clings to a debased currency, which in the end is bound to be worthless. Clinging to life's phenomena is not loving life. Loving life is accepting its rhythms and moving in step with them; subordinating one's ambitions and egotistic pursuits to the natural ebb and flow rather than striving, like King Canute, to impose one's own authority.

In his writing, Muggeridge has treated death in two ways: As a young man, it is the joker in the pack, upsetting carefully laid plans and disrupting confident expectations. However, in his later writing, death is seen as a rite of passage and man as a caterpillar who must shuffle off an old worn chrysalis in order to fly away.

A similar transition has occurred with respect to his view of immortality. He never would have denied the possibility of an afterlife, but as

Copyrighted material

a young man he was more skeptical and inclined to agnosticism. At the age of eighteen, he said: "There could never be a Hell because we should all soon get quite used to it."[4] Then he would have taken the position that since it was impossible to know with certainty, it was unavailing to speculate about it. And he would assuredly have dismissed as credulous buffoons those evangelicals and fundamentalists with whom in later years he is often incongruously linked for their sort of tour-guide prospectus to the nether regions of eternity. To the extent that he considered immortality even possible, it was because he could not bring himself to believe that these three score and ten years of eating, sleeping, rutting, and acquiring, "measuring out our life with coffee spoons," as T. S. Eliot put it, could be all there was to it. If it were, it would be too banal, too tedious a game for spectator and participant alike, too witless a drama for so spectacular a set. His later writings, by contrast, take a more orthodox Christian position on death and immortality. Death is now seen as a corridor running between the city of destruction and the city of God; corridors are not places one chooses to linger, neither are they particularly foreboding.

His academic record at Cambridge was undistinguished, and he alternated between making excuses for this (some of which were plausible—obviously he was reading the wrong subject, and his health was uncertain; as a child he had been diagnosed tubercular, and he was experiencing heart troubles that required unpleasant medication) and promises to do better. In October 1921, he wrote that his father had given up on him and now looked on him as "a complete washout." There is no evidence that this was so; in fact, a few years later he wrote at some length thanking his father for never losing faith in him through "all my foolish escapades" at Cambridge.

The academic low point came on June 24, 1922, when he got a letter from his tutor, S. C. Carpenter, saying that he had failed his examinations.

He considered quitting, or in the current phrase "dropping out," but decided it would be too great a disappointment to his father. So he stayed on and solicited Carpenter's help in improving his performance, which he did—at least to a minimal passing standard. Actually, Carpenter was a considerable influence on Muggeridge; it was he who persuaded Muggeridge to be baptized and confirmed, which he was in Queen's College Chapel on March 6, 1921.

By far the most important thing that happened to him at Cambridge was making the acquaintance of Alec Vidler, who was also at Selwyn College. Vidler was four years his senior, reading theology, and destined for a distinguished career as priest, theologian, and don—latterly as dean of King's College. Vidler was a rowing man and, in the

Copyrighted material

Lent term of 1921, coached a boat in which Muggeridge was an oarsman. It fared disastrously, "going down" four times on four successive days. Despite this inauspicious beginning, they became inseparable friends.

They were both active members of an oratory society. Often they played tennis together and even entered as partners in a doubles tournament. During vacations Vidler visited Malcolm in Croydon and found himself attracted to H. T. Muggeridge, as he has recounted in his autobiography: ". . . I at once fell under the spell of Malcolm's father who was soon to become a Labour M.P. He was one of those devoted idealists with a passionate desire to win justice for the poor and underprivileged, who then abounded in the Labour Party. He had already visited Cambridge in the May term and I had written in my diary: 'Mr. Muggeridge I fell in love with right away—in fact I think I had done so long before I ever saw him', i.e., from what Malcolm had told me about him."[5]

In the summer vacation of 1921 Malcolm repaid the visit by going to stay with Vidler in Rye. On one warm, lazy day they strolled together on the beach in animated conversation. There being no one about, they stripped to the skin and swam out a considerable distance. When they turned back, they were abashed to see a middle-aged Rye matron and her young daughter taking up occupation of the beach right next to their discarded clothing. Since they seemed reluctant to move on, modesty compelled a much longer swim than the young men had anticipated.

It is not difficult to explain the mutual attraction that led to their friendship. In Vidler, Muggeridge recognized one of those rare human beings whose company is at the same time stimulating and soothing, and whose spiritual balance is so acute and finely tuned that an inward serenity is radiated. For his part, Vidler detected in Muggeridge, even from their first meeting, ". . . a kind of genius as a talker and writer, and even as a seer."[6] As a result, Vidler retained all Muggeridge's letters from those far-off years, and these provide a vivid picture of the development of his political and religious views. They reveal a searching, often self-pitying young man, earnest though with a redeeming sense of humor, rather indolent, inclined to priggishness, a person who revealed different facets of his personality to different friends. To Vidler, Muggeridge revealed his spiritual side, raising questions about the meaning of life and faith and God, occasionally revealing doubts—although, on the whole, he was then a remarkably sanguine believer—and always finishing up by requesting Vidler's guidance and prayers.

For most of his four Cambridge years, Muggeridge actively considered becoming a priest. In 1921 he discussed this with a clergyman named

Copyrighted material

Philips who ran a mission to the destitute and derelict of Croydon: "God prosper him—if he will let me I am going to join him."[7] It was at Vidler's suggestion that Muggeridge went to live for his last Cambridge year at Oratory House on Lady Margaret Road, the home of an Anglican religious order of celibate priests and laymen called The Oratory of the Good Shepherd. At first he fell contentedly into the daily routine, saying the offices, observing the silences, taking the sacraments. Looking back on this period, he later wrote: "I think I was happier there than I have ever been or ever can be. . . ."[8] He came under the influence of Wilfred Knox, of whom he grew very fond, and Knox pressed him strongly to enter the priesthood. So unrelenting did this pressure become that to escape he moved out of Oratory House for his final term, taking rooms at 46 Owlstone Road. The landlady, a Miss Lloyd, had known better times and never tired of telling her boarders that her family had once kept a carriage and pair, each time glaring at her listener as if to say: "And look what I've come to now—taking in the likes of you." So tedious did this repetition become that Malcolm resolved to devote his first earnings to replacing her carriage and pair. It was in this house that he met Leonard Dobbs and his sister, Kitty, whom he was later to marry.

From the beginning of his time at Cambridge, he was imbued with a strong sense of mission, of some unique destiny that he must find and fulfill. At first he identified this with the priesthood, but by late 1922 he was already turning his thoughts more to writing. To Alec Vidler, he wrote: "Sometimes, dearest friend, I long to be in the fray—to be able to stand up and speak all the burning words of which my heart is full—to *Do* something . . . God has some destiny mapped; some work for me to do and it is growing on me. . . ."[9]

Although he continued to attend mass regularly, the seeds of doubt about the institutional church were already taking root. He and Vidler argued about this endlessly. Vidler would defend the church as a necessary evil; Muggeridge, failing to perceive its necessity, scorned or mocked it. To the extent that one had to choose between religious denominations, Muggeridge expressed a preference for a church of "strict principles" where "on Sunday mornings you hear about Hell fire as I regard that as most important." But as time went on, his Cambridge letters reveal growing doubts about the church and the priestly vocation. He described his soul as "groping in the dark, restless and dispirited." In September 1921, he sent Vidler this epitaph: "My Epitaph: Here lieth one whose soul sometimes burned with great longings. To whom sometimes the curtain of the Infinite was opened

Copyrighted material

just a little, but who lacked just the GUTS to make any use of it."

To Stanley Ellams, another Cambridge friend, Muggeridge showed quite a different side of his personality. With Ellams he would relax and go to parties, go on walking or cycling expeditions, and generally lead the dilettantish life that one expects of an undergraduate. In such company, he was an amusing, carefree companion, ready at a moment's notice to put aside books in favor of a lark.

He entertained generously and spent extravagantly (particularly on clothes)—in fact, well beyond his limited means. As a result, he came to know the Cambridge bank well ("the jolliest bank in the world") and its manager, known to undergraduates simply as "the old man." The manager had an austerely bald head and a severe countenance, but actually he was an easy mark for a loan. In Malcolm's final year, a new manager came who refused what would have been his third overdraft that year. "I walked away in a quiet and dignified way, never to apply to him again. If it hadn't been for the fact that I had a small overdraft at the time of my application, I should have threatened to withdraw my account from the bank altogether, but that would have been too much in his favour."[10]

Occasionally the two sides of his personality and their separate friends came together. In September 1923, he found himself twelve pounds in debt through extravagant living and wrote asking Alec Vidler to bail him out. He argued that he could not approach his father because the previous year H. T. had paid fifty-three pounds to clear just such debts, and now ". . . if he knew I still owed this much, it would break his heart." As an impecunious curate of frugal disposition, Vidler was having none of it; he replied suggesting that Malcolm make a clean breast of it to his father. He did. "My pater was very decent about it—didn't rave, just seemed resigned. That was gall to me."[11] As Dr. Johnson once stood contritely in the drizzle of the Uttoxeter market place to atone for his youthful impetuosity, so Muggeridge later wrote to his father apologizing for ". . . the many hours you must have spent at ledgers for me to waste my time extravagantly at Cambridge."[12]

His studies held no attraction, but talking, debating, and reading did. His taste in books was eclectic; varied and casual rather than scholarly. At home, H. T.'s library had been small and confined mostly to political theory, economics, and fabianism, so Cambridge was Malcolm's first encounter with a great and catholic library; he made use of it, though not in ways calculated to earn academic dividends. D. H. Lawrence became his passion and, at Malcolm's urging, Vidler too read all the novels and poems, and they talked endlessly about them. In light of Muggeridge's later criticism of Lawrence, it should be said that even during his most worshipful Lawrence period, he dismissed Law-

Copyrighted material

rence's attitudes on sex—particularly his descriptions of encounters between Lady Chatterly and Mellors—as contrived and ludicrous. At Oratory House he began to read books on religious themes, particularly mysticism, although he shunned formal theology as boring and slightly suspicious.

Politically, Muggeridge was still a naive socialist. There were none of the doubts or fitful despair on political questions that there were on religious matters; at most there was only occasional unease. He vowed to ". . . live utterly with the people and their labour party . . . I am with it as heartily as I would have been with the French revolution."[13] When he returned to Croydon during vacations he would campaign for his father's various causes. His reputation as an orator had already become known, and he was often asked to speak on behalf of Labour party candidates in nearby constituencies. To sharpen his son's oratorical skills, H. T. had given Malcolm a lifetime membership in the Cambridge Union Society. In his memoirs, Muggeridge asserts: "I scarcely ever attended, and never once spoke."[14] Actually, his memory again has played him false. He attended frequently (letters to friends are written on Union letterhead) and, in February 1921, he debated the ex-president of the Loyalist Society on the resolution: "That the twentieth century is a general improvement on the nineteenth." For the first—and no doubt only—time in his life, Muggeridge took the affirmative and won.

He left Cambridge in May 1924, having managed to scrape out a pass degree. Four years at Cambridge had not made a scholar of him. Nor had he emerged as the brilliant socialist set for a dazzling political career, a young Laski or Tawney, as his father had hoped. H. T. had dreamed of editing a socialist superman; in fact, he had subbed only a revised copy of himself. Perhaps the most important aspect of the Cambridge years was that Malcolm had met Alec Vidler, to whom at once he confided a premonition that they would remain intimate friends for the rest of their lives. Like many of his premonitions, this was to be exactly realized.

By the time he graduated, he was convinced that he had a mission in life, a destiny he must discover and fulfill, and increasingly his attention had shifted from the church to writing. His brother's death had forced him to confront mortality, not as an idea but as an inescapable reality of life. He remained politically innocent, but on all other issues he was beginning to practice John Donne's advice, to doubt wisely. For the rest of his years, doubt and skepticism would be companions, mental alarm bells that would go clanging off whenever his beliefs

Copyrighted material

began to congeal into dogma, rousing him to shake the dust from his eyes and move on. The church he had begun to see less as a sanctuary in which to worship than as an institution which, like all institutions, was required to make an accommodation with power and therefore deserved to be mistrusted. The gates of hell might not prevail against it, but they would certainly have their innings, and thenceforth he would not be above joining in to hurl a few bricks of his own. Cambridge may have taught him little natural science, but in bringing this rather impressionable, gauche, and irresolute young man to the verge of maturity it played a significant, albeit inadvertent, role in his life.

Near the end of his final term, Muggeridge met the Reverend W.E.S. Holland and was much impressed by his robust, shining earnestness, which was given a halo effect by a bald pate fringed with a cluster of tight grey curls. To Alec Vidler he called Holland "the leading Indian educationalist." Later, after actually observing Holland in action, he revised his opinion considerably: "Most of his life has been spent in India, labouring to shake Indians into the pattern he knew best and admired most—of a godly, righteous and sober Englishman who had been to a good public school, played games, and delightedly, or, as he would put it, prayerfully, read his Bible."[15] Holland offered him a job teaching English at Union Christian College in Alwaye, southern India. For a time, Muggeridge equivocated; he sought Vidler's advice, stressing the points in favor of accepting Holland's offer: The subject—"English as you know is my pet hobby"; the salary—"practically nothing but that I feel is to the good"; and a religious atmosphere—"he is taking me on as a Catholic and the life I shall live will be a community life. . . ."[16] Vidler was unimpressed by all this and replied somewhat snootily, rejecting all his arguments: "Your justification of the action you propose to take seems to me to be an excuse for doing something which has caught your imagination. Rather than a rational case for doing your duty."[17] His duty, as Vidler still saw it, was to enter the priesthood.

Having sought advice, it was characteristic of Muggeridge to reject it, and he decided to go. He spent the summer and early part of the autumn in Belgium, working as a tour guide for Henry Lunn's travel agency, which allowed him to renew contact with Kitty Dobbs who was staying at her parents' holiday villa at Knocke-le-Zoute.

On December 25, 1924, his father accompanied him to Tilbury to see him off on his passage to India. It was a chilly, misty day, and they walked briskly up and down the pier to keep warm. Malcolm could scarcely converse for excitement. "When the bell rang for visitors to leave the ship and walk away, I was surprised and rather disgusted with myself, to find that I felt a kind of relief at leaving him, too."[18]

Copyrighted material

·3·
INDIA

India is a place in which it is impossible to avoid thinking.

Malcolm Muggeridge to Alec Vidler, April 6, 1925

* * *

Life aboard the S.S. *Moria* was little to his taste. Like most ships, she was ill-suited to physical exercise but lavishly equipped for eating, and the sea air made him hungry. There was a storm in the Bay of Biscay, and he became seasick. Most of the other passengers were tiresome—"rather dull Empire builders"—and Muggeridge was shunned for sharing a second-class stateroom with an Indian clergyman, the Reverend C. K. Jacob. One passenger, an engineer, was overheard to remark that it ". . . was just not right"; later, C. K. Jacob became a bishop and, presumably, an acceptable shipmate. Despite such unsympathetic company and the sheer tedium of the five-week voyage, Muggeridge was delighted to turn his back on England. From Port Said (where he purchased a topee which he discarded almost as soon as he arrived in India) he wrote to Alec Vidler: "There is a great relief in being away from England. I think you are right when you say that the hope for that country, even in our lives, has got slenderer and slenderer, until now one feels it could easily break any moment. It is all very baffling."[1]

By late January he was settled at Alwaye. It was then little more than a village, with the college itself set in the hills three miles off, across the Perrier River in which he bathed morning and night. He moved into a small, plain room in the student residence, furnished with a bed, a writing table, a chair, and an oil lamp.

Union Christian College had been founded in 1921 by a former lecturer at Madras University, K. C. Charcko. Syrian Christians, assisted by Roman Catholic and Anglican missionaries, provided the college's first teaching staff, although by Muggeridge's time all but

Copyrighted material

three of the fifteen lecturers were Indian. There were then 214 students, most of whom were Christian, the rest divided about equally between Hindus and Muslims. Early in his stay Muggeridge enumerated, in typically categorical fashion, the "special advantages" of Union Christian College: "(1) *It is Indian.* The students wear their national dress. We have a bad name with the government, thank God, because of our nationalist tendencies. (2) *The students see Europeans working under Indians.* A thing, I believe, I am right in saying, absolutely unique through the whole of India. (3) *That the Christianity is Indian or Syrian,* and not imported respectable Anglicanism. (4) *That as a member of the staff one is not a missionary,* and so is free from all societies. (5) *That one lives with Indians,* and so comes to understand their strengths and weaknesses without prejudice."[2]

He arrived fired with enthusiasm. "I am very happy and contented here. The work is interesting, the students are delightful, and the whole thing a tremendous adventure."[3] Muggeridge has never been a man for quarters and halves; he loves ecstatically or loathes bitterly, often sliding so quickly from euphoria to despair that he fails to experience the more moderate sensations in between. It is a quality—or failing—that he recognized early in himself: "I cannot live except completely, being of that nature."[4]

As soon as he was settled, he took over the college dramatic society, rashly promising productions in their first season of *Othello, Julius Caesar,* and "a farce" to be written by himself. *Othello* was staged with Muggeridge playing Iago. Of the fate of the other two productions, there is no record; there was, however, a memorable performance of Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* on founder's day (January 22, 1926) in which Muggeridge played Miss Neville.

He also set about establishing a college magazine and became its first editor. It appeared twice yearly.

At first the administration applauded his initiative, but their enthusiasm began to pall when, in the first issue of the magazine, he lampooned faculty and students alike. He mocked the faculty for supposing that their labors, ". . . in the spirit of Mr. Dryasdust, B.A., B.L., author of notes on this, and notes on that and notes on every possible thing except on life,"[5] could possibly make any lasting impact on anyone. They were alien teachers on foreign soil, mouthing the last words of a dying civilization. It was not a point of view likely to ingratiate a new boy. The administration soon came to regard him as a thorn in their side, while his colleagues' reactions ran the gamut from amusement to disapproval. A few teachers would have nothing to do with him. Since he had already come to regard the staff as ". . . low-level liaison officers with the Indians" he paid little heed. His only

Copyrighted material

close friend at the place was not a European but a strict Brahmin, V. S. Venkatranam, who taught mathematics but introduced Muggeridge to Eastern religious thought and mysticism, matters in which he has retained a life long interest.

Of the students he wrote: "The Indian undergraduate is a strange being. He imagines that to be impressive, he must be pompous."[6]

What exactly the students made of this brash, energetic twenty-two-year-old addition to the faculty, with his dogmatic, unorthodox views, argumentative disposition, and charitable personality, it is difficult to know. Shortly after he arrived, he was made warden of the residence, and this proved to be a popular choice. He was benevolent to a fault, winking at the most flagrant violations of the rules, venting his anger only at the interminable parliamentary style proceedings by which they were formulated and amended. "Why waste time over rules which I ignore anyway?" was his attitude.

He particularly encouraged the more nationalist students who appreciated the fact that he made no attempt to set himself apart, either as a *sahib* or as an instructor. He lived with the students, adopted Indian dress and dietary habits, sat cross-legged and meditated with them, and slept without a mattress. He was eager to converse and yet made no effort to convert anyone to anything. Since the students were surrounded by missionaries of one sort or another, this alone must have made him attractive. And, despite the self-denigrating tone of his memoirs, he was an outstanding teacher. Enthusiasm, eloquence, and a touch of ham are the lecturer's trump cards, and he had all three; knowledge is a bonus, a face card in reserve, and he had enough of that to get by. The only direct evidence of the students' attitude is this parody of the Book of Chronicles that was anonymously submitted to the college magazine and gleefully published by its editor.

> And there dwelt in the N.E. Hostel a warden by name Malc, the son of Mug, a white man, and one who laughed with all his might: for he was very humorous.
>
> And he said unto himself, I will buy unto myself a machine, for to speak with me: for I am very lonely.
>
> And he bought unto himself a machine, cunningly made, for to speak to him; and behold, it sang him songs.
>
> And Malc, the son of Mug, he bethought unto himself a new device, for to amuse himself and he said: I would make unto myself a garden.
>
> And he digged the ground, and put manure and planted the seeds: and he did this in a privy part of the compound: for he said, lest anyone should see it.
>
> And he fenced it round with wire netting: lest the beasts of the field should tramp on it: for he was a wise man.

Copyrighted material

> And the rest of the doings of Malc, are they not written in the book of the Chronicles of the staff, and in the hearts of the members of the College?
> Let us therefore take heed and stop, lest we should bore anyone, and he should say: There is nothing new in this.[7]

During his first term, the poet Rabindranath Tagore came to open a student hostel named in his honor. Muggeridge met Tagore and later went to visit his ashram where he donned a saffron robe and sat on a grass mat at the guru's feet. He was disappointed: "Tagore's discourse delivered in a rich, melodious voice failed to hold my attention—which was no reflection on it. I have always found it almost impossible to maintain interest in any form of oration, lecture or sermon. . . . All I can remember is that Tagore was then concerned with Western materialism, and the great part Asia or, more particularly, India, had to play in turning those who were bogged down in this gross delusion to more spiritual attitudes."[8]

Muggeridge also wrote to Tagore raising questions about celibacy, a topic that dominated his mind and correspondence at this time—ostensibly because he had not yet entirely abandoned the idea of the priesthood. Tagore replied in rather vague terms, indicating that ". . . some check upon procreation is common ground between us," but that they were "diametrically opposed" on acceptable methods to achieve this result. Muggeridge's side of this correspondence is lost, but in all likelihood he was advocating contraception and sterilization—measures he would only later come to regard as anathema.

Muggeridge's concern about celibacy is revealing. Two kinds of people are attracted by celibacy: those for whom sex is, for reasons of temperament or capacity, an incidental, unimportant aspect of life; and those for whom it is so central and relentless a force that celibacy appears to offer the best hope of maintaining one's balance, perhaps even one's sanity. Muggeridge belonged to the second category. He believed that he must learn to control lust or be controlled by it. For him, lust was the devil's ace of trumps, and the devil played it well and often.

In one letter to his father, he described his reaction on unexpectedly discovering a woman bathing during his evening swim.

> She came to the river and took off her clothes and stood naked, her brown body just caught by the sun. I suddenly went mad. There came to me that dryness in the back of my throat; that feeling of cruelty and strength and wild unreasonableness which is called passion. I darted with all the force of swimming I had to where she was, and then nearly fainted, for she was old and hideous and her feet were deformed and turned inwards and her skin was wrinkled and, worst of all, she was a leper. You

Copyrighted material

> have never seen a leper I suppose; until you have seen one you do not know the worst that human ugliness can be. This creature grinned at me, showing a toothless mask, and the next thing I knew was that I was swimming along in my old way in the middle of the stream—yet trembling. . . .
>
> It was the kind of lesson I needed. When I think of lust now I think of this lecherous woman. Oh, if only I could paint, I'd make a wonderful picture of a passionate boy running after that and call it: "The lusts of the flesh."[9]

From an early age, Muggeridge obviously had sex on his mind which, as he later acknowledged, is an odd place to have it. He had that combination of fascination and fear about women that is common to men who have grown up without sisters. Sex is a recurrent topic, particularly in his early writing, fiction as well as nonfiction. His first play, *Three Flats*, was attacked for its casual approach to sex and adultery. Similarly, his novel *In a Valley of this Restless Mind* was looked at askance for its preoccupation with lust; so much so, in fact, that when it was reissued in 1978, Muggeridge wrote an apologetic introduction in which he admitted that ". . . the obsession with carnality, looked back on across four decades, could not but seem distasteful, especially as I have often criticized other writers for indulging this particular obsession." Today, both books would be regarded as being as tame as a spinster's parrot, pure in outlook and language. But this is a different age, awash in sexual permissiveness.

Muggeridge's attitudes on sex must be assessed by the standards of his own time and generation. This is no easy task, partly because he is one of the few contemporary writers to appreciate and exploit the comic possibilities of sex. Among his notable contributions in this vein was a brilliant send-up of Wayland Young's portentous and ludicrous book, *Eros Denied*, in which Muggeridge suggested that sensibility and language might both be better served if the old four-letter verb for fornication (one which he has never been averse to using) was allowed to lapse and be replaced instead by the more elegant verb "to wayland."

Yet beneath the laughter is strain, perhaps even anguish. The frequency with which he dragged a sexual reference or innuendo, of no particular relevance, into an article or book review suggested a kind of smutty curiosity that ill accords (but frequently accompanies) high-minded piety. It is inflating a valid point to write, as Bernard Levin did, that Muggeridge's latter day campaigns against pornography and the permissive society amount to ". . . begging the world to stop trying to inflame his withered desires, lest the attempt should prove successful."[10] But it is true that there is a connection between these campaigns and his own past; he knows, from personal experience, just how

Copyrighted material

insatiable the sexual urge can be. Lust makes its greatest appeal to imaginative people because it offers the nearest fleshly equivalent to the soul's longing to be submerged in oneness, in unity. In sex the ego's tentacle grip is loosed, and one momentarily forgets self and enters the realm of ecstasy, otherwise reserved for mystics.

Muggeridge also knows what social scientists and others of that ilk take such pains to deny: Namely, that exposure to pornography or other material designed to inflame sexual appetite can have a corroding effect on some people—people like him. Not for nothing is lust ranked last and most deadly of the seven deadly sins.

Also, his journalistic experience has conditioned him to seek out what really interests readers, as opposed to what they purport to be interested in. Sex is interesting. What honest person would not prefer to know who someone sleeps with rather than who they vote for? Muggeridge has taken his turn at churning out juicy gossip paragraphs that are avidly seized upon by eyes unstrained by surrounding high-minded editorials.

The sexual tension that manifests itself in Muggeridge's writing comes, in part, from trying to keep a balance between what he believes, with utmost sincerity, about the effect of unbridled lust, and memories of past temptations in his own life—temptations not always overcome. For most of his life, he has been torn between forswearing lust and yielding to it with a delicious shiver.

Another early visitor to Union Christian College was Mahatma Gandhi, who came there in March 1925, from Vaicom where he had spoken on untouchability. Muggeridge and most of the students waited for hours at the railway station to glimpse his arrival. When his wooden, third-class railway carriage pulled in, Gandhi immediately went over to a group of untouchables who had been specially cordoned off and began singing hymns with them. When he spoke at the college, he received a tumultuous reception. Afterwards, Gandhi planted a mango tree in the college courtyard as a perpetual memorial of his visit.

In the first issue of the college magazine, Muggeridge wrote an adulatory editorial praising the simplicity of Gandhi's address: "Take a wheel and spin and as you spin, sing, and as you sing, love your fellow men and the troubles of the country will be ended." This, he wrote, was the only sensible alternative to the "absurd visionaries and idealists"—politicians, militarists, businessmen, and missionaries—who had "failed utterly" to better the lot of the Indian people and, in the process, had made a botch of world affairs. Muggeridge even praised

Copyrighted material

Gandhi's impracticality: "It is time that such impractical people were given a chance to try their hand at government."[11]

Muggeridge followed up Gandhi's visit with a letter urging the *Swarajist* movement to adopt a more aggressive and explicitly socialist policy. Gandhi replied and published their correspondence in his newspaper *Young India*.

Several of Gandhi's characteristics were bound to attract Muggeridge. He was an underdog, and Muggeridge is temperamentally suited to be in opposition to any established authority or institution. While Gandhi preached revolution, it was a revolution to be won by each person transforming himself, becoming a new man or new woman imbued with the spirit of *satyagraha*, truth and force, rather than by collective struggle. This approach exactly suited Muggeridge's mistrust of collective action ("Organization carries in itself the destruction of the ideal organized," he wrote) and his fierce individualism. Then, too, Gandhi's asceticism—his peculiar notions about diet, dress, and sexual behaviour—would all appeal to a young Englishman, living an austere, celibate life, and seeking to put as much distance as possible between himself and his fellow Europeans. Even Gandhi's religion which, although nominally Hindu, borrowed eclectically from Buddhism and Christianity, encouraged Muggeridge to expand his own religious horizons and to delve more deeply into the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita to which V. S. Venkatranam had recently introduced him. The more he read and pondered, the more tawdry and confined the dogma and practices of the Church of England seemed.

Muggeridge did not share all of Gandhi's views. Nonviolence and pacifism seemed to him unattainable ideals, and he later set out his objections in a long, thoughtful article "Why I am not a Pacifist."[12] He was more nationalistic than either Gandhi or the most ardent students at Alwaye, and he never passed up an opportunity to employ his oratorical skill to stir up trouble. He urged the students to rebel against the Raj and all vestiges of colonialism, including (perhaps especially including) the faculty and staff of Union Christian College. After one such oration a colleague warned him that men had served time for less inflammatory and seditious remarks. "Rather to my disappointment, the authorities either never heard of my vapourings or, if they did, decided, quite rightly, that they were of no importance, requiring no response on their part."[13]

Muggeridge kept a diary and most of it has been preserved, written in his crabbed, nearly illegible handwriting by fountain pen on sheets of yellowed onionskin paper, stuck together, it seems, as much by the oppressive heat and humidity in which it was first written as by the

Copyrighted material

passage of years. His diary and letters provide a detailed picture of his daily routine.

He would rise early and read, usually poetry ("I believe it is good to start one's day to the tune of poetry"), until a manservant named Kuruvella delivered tea at six. Kuruvella was good-hearted but slow-witted. Once Muggeridge was burned by a box of matches that exploded when he was smoking in bed. He shouted to Kuruvella for ointment. Kuruvella first brought brasso, then toothpaste. On another occasion he came upon Kuruvella trying to light the primus stove with communion wine. After tea, Muggeridge would bathe in the river. There followed a light breakfast, more reading and writing until the bells at nine-thirty signaled the beginning of lectures. Muggeridge had a tendency to be late, and once, encountering an Indian colleague in the staff room, he inquired breathlessly if the bells had gone yet. The Indian slowly raised his head, studied him, and gravely replied: "Some bells have gone, some bells are yet to go. . . ." The rest of the morning he would pace back and forth at the front of a classroom with open sides, looking out on paddy fields where rows of brown backs were stooped in the baking sun, brown arms extended picking rice, brown legs treading round huge irrigation wheels. In the cooler shade he would try to make sense of English literature, drawn from an anthology called Little Dowden, with students whose comprehension of tragedy was acute enough but who failed to grasp why King Lear should choose to give away his kingdom to his daughters. After lunch, a siesta, then more of the same—it might be Wordsworth and the Lake poets, or Tennyson's requiem for Arthur Hallam—with Muggeridge becoming ever more "physically anguished" by the bizarre contrast between the reality of life all around him and the fantasies on which he was obliged to discourse. Or the afternoon might be blessedly free of lectures; time for tea and reading and writing. In the evenings, he would invariably walk. Walking has been one of the few constant passions of his life, whether on Croydon back streets, by the Thames or the Cam, between paddy fields under a sweltering sun, in the drizzle of London, the dust of Cairo, in Moscow, Geneva, Washington, and Rome, or now—in old age—through the woods and dales of Sussex. This is Muggeridge at his most typical; pounding along, dueling with his walking stick at offending shrubbery, alone and silent, wrapped in his own thoughts; or with one or two others or a company of people, voluble, laughing, with a stream of mirth, eloquence, and character assassination erupting from him.

At Alwaye, his favorite walk took him along the Parur road to a village about two and a half miles away whose name meant "the fort,"

Copyrighted material

although no trace of a fort was then visible. He would set out in late afternoon, turn again in twilight, and complete the walk at dusk when little lights were just beginning to flare up as families gathered here and there for a bite to eat before the darker oblivion of sleep. So often and regularly did he walk this road that he came to know its *habitués* by sight, if not name. He studied their faces and habits. None made a deeper impression on him than a retarded boy who drove geese; Muggeridge wrote about him in *The Calcutta Guardian* on November 4, 1926.

> His chest is sunken, his face is vacant and his eyes are dull, yet he drives his geese skillfully; and believe me or not as you like, he speaks to them in the soft, caressing voice a mother uses to a very little baby. He carries no stick to assist him in keeping order amongst them, but only a large leaf, which he waves slowly to and fro; and one might easily imagine that his speech was nothing but the noise of the wind through this, so like is it to the sound of a forest when, in the evening, a light wind blows. With this he keeps his charges as a compact, disciplined company, not stupidly military in their orderliness, yet not by any means a rabble; rather they remind one of a band of pilgrims, or of workers working voluntarily together. They seem to be not so much numbered and uniformed as to make a harmony of which he is the conductor: not so much to march in step as to dance with perfect understanding of each other's movements. I realized how supremely successful he was at his work when, one day when perhaps he was ill, I saw another boy at it. This other boy was a bouncing, bumptious fellow, who carried a switch like a sergeant-major, and who shouted at the geese as *sahibs* shout when they want something. The result was that they spread over the road in a screaming, cackling mob—some getting left behind; some getting run over by a passing motor; all of them lost and bewildered. And the more he shouted and beat them the more hopeless the position got.
>
> There are pretty morals to be drawn from this contrast between the persuasive methods of the idiot boy with the sunken chest, who understands the speech of geese, and those of the sane boy with the broad chest, but moralizing is a thankless task; indeed it is a confession of incoherence, so I shall avoid it. But I must say that I envy the goose boy. I feel that he has found the secret of happiness in that he has done one useful thing which he can do superlatively well, and which he is content to go on doing from day to day until he dies. When his soul leaves the poor, puny body, with its gapingly vacant face, I believe it will be found to be a rare and beautiful soul, pleasing to its maker. Sometimes I wonder about him—whether he will marry; whether he prays or has any kind of religion; whether he ever wonders about the meaning of things. All this is doubtful; what is certain is that he can drive the geese efficiently; and to do that is quite as worthy of praise as to write a book or bleat a lecture or drone a sermon or do any of the things we wretched intelligentsia preen ourselves on.[14]

Copyrighted material

Leaving behind the goose boy and the fish man and the laborers driving the cattle and the unmistakable smell of dust and jasmine, he would arrive back at the college, bathe again in the last light, and pick his way perilously up the narrow path back to his residence. The college grounds were supposed to be lighted by oil lamps; however, the lamplighter put in only half the oil required, saving the rest for his personal consumption, so walking about at night was hazardous.

It was the experience of being in the Indian police that turned George Orwell against imperialism: "In order to hate imperialism, you have got to be part of it" he wrote in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Muggeridge's experience in India soured him on both imperialism and, for many years, on Christianity.

Running the college dramatic society, producing Shakespearian tragedies and Restoration comedies with native students got up in wigs and powder to look like knights or rakes, soon proved wearying. And editing what was, in effect, a foreign language magazine for young, mostly apathetic students, whose interest in letters seldom extended beyond the two they wished to add to their own name, seemed even more absurd.

As for the missionaries by whom he was surrounded—with their ersatz piety and vulgar phrases: "spreading the gospel net," "converting heathen," "winning souls," and so on; their colonialist mentality and prostration before the most ridiculous excesses of the Raj; and their churches, in which men not wearing trousers were unwelcome and Indians had specially allotted pews—he soon grew utterly contemptuous of them. Within two months of his arrival he referred to them as "awful tripe" and ridiculed their efforts "to bring a thing, decayed and effete in England, here and expect to see it live under this blue sky where its hypocrisy seems doubly shown."[15]

He spent the long vacation of March 1925 at Ootacamund in the cooler Nilgiri Hills, staying at a bungalow for missionaries run by an evangelical spinster, Miss Edith Hopwood. She was a great lover of Bunyan and called the Nilgiri peaks, visible from her garden, the Delectable Mountains. Although she died in 1944, the bungalow called "Farley" is still there, having been bequeathed by Miss Hopwood to a missionary society. She was a simple, decent sort who went out of her way to be kind to Muggeridge, but he found the missionaries who gathered there intolerable. To escape them he hired a pony and tent and set off alone for several days of solitude and meditation. Just before leaving, he wrote to Alec Vidler: "I feel as though it were a sort of pilgrimage, as though I might find something on it." He did. He found that his

Copyrighted material

estrangement from the missionaries had spread to the church they purported to represent, "its organization, its uniforms and its rule of thumb moralities," and even to Christianity itself. While he had had vagrant doubts at Cambridge, now he set about a wholesale reexamination of his beliefs. It would be going too far to say that he became an agnostic on this expedition, but his beliefs were shaken. "Organized religion kills the living beauty of God," he wrote to Vidler when he got back.

How often it happens that a spiritual straggler turns aside at the church door when he catches sight of those coming out of it! This is an understandable attitude, but not a wholly rational one—as Muggeridge himself was later to realize. No doubt Christ's rather scruffy, ragtag band of followers, with their own power seekers, egomaniacs, and, of course, Judas, upset some of the more sensitive Galileans of His day. But Christ deserves to be judged for Himself, on His own, not on the basis of His twelve hand-picked disciples, still less by His ostensible representatives twenty centuries later. For Muggeridge it would be many years before he could erase from his mind what he had seen of the church and its agents in India and consider Christianity, at least in its organized, institutional dimensions, afresh.

Back at the college, it came his turn to preach the Sunday morning sermon in the chapel. It must have been quite a scene, with Muggeridge delivering himself of just the kind of vaporous, leftist rhetoric then regarded as shockingly inflammatory, but which now has become the church's last remaining orthodoxy. As usual, he was years ahead of his time. Had he delivered this sermon at, say, the 1978 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops when the assembled delegates paraded into assembly to the tune of the Groovers rock band and voted to donate their parishioners' offerings to arm the revolutionary terrorists of Zimbabwe, it would all have seemed yawningly familiar and old hat.

Muggeridge began by telling the students that Jesus was "a glorious revolutionary" who cared nothing for creeds and dogmas and religious orthodoxies, "those miserable and pettifogging ideas," but instead preached a gospel of revolution to the downtrodden and oppressed of Jerusalem. If he did not actually say that Jesus was an early Fabian, he might as well have. His text was Christ's great commandment—to love God and one's neighbor as one's self—"the two commandments are virtually the same" and this meant, he said, working for social betterment so that man can "mould the world anew." Even the recently founded League of Nations had a part to play in ushering in the kingdom: "What a new Jerusalem they could create from Geneva!"[16]

What the students made of this sermon is unknown. The more evangelical of his colleagues were unhappy, and he became even more a

Copyrighted material

pariah. It is ironic that in 1925 he was condemned and ostracized by the ecclesiastical establishment, such as it was, of Union Christian College for having the temerity to espouse a particular view of Christianity for which, when he came to denounce the same view forty years later in *Jesus Rediscovered,* he was condemned again by the ecclesiastical establishment.

In July he was back in the Nilgiri Hills, this time on doctor's orders. His recurrent stomach troubles, aggravated by unfamiliar food, dysentery, and a cook named Albert whom Muggeridge discovered straining soup through a cloth that had been used all day to wipe dirty pots, had resulted in some sort of intestinal collapse. He was sent off to the higher, cooler altitude to recuperate. If he did not mend quickly, the doctor said that he must be sent home. He passed the days reading, exercising, and sleeping. He was put on a strict vegetarian diet, which he discovered he enjoyed, and he vowed "to stick to it forever"; he didn't, actually, although in his sixties he reverted again to a vegetarian regime.

Although he recovered quickly and was back at work by the end of August, the prospect of going home was no longer unpleasant. He had been at Alwaye for little more than six months, but already he pined for the "jostly crowds" of London, its clamor and action. He was increasingly restless and dispirited. Every day in the classroom, reciting Little Dowden to students who would commit his words to memory, seemed ". . . an inward Hell, because I am doing nothing." Lecturing was a process by which his notes became the student's notes without passing through the heads of either. He disliked having to sit down with a student and review his, perhaps desultory, performance: " 'Ah, Soolapani Warrier, you must be more serious at your work, you have brains but you are lazy'; what would have been my fate had such a review taken place at Cambridge?"[17]

Perhaps he should return to England but to what? Teach? His heart was not in it. Preach? Yet now he had little left but doubts, and although he still occasionally raised the possibility of a priestly vocation in letters to Vidler, he knew that a catalog of one's doubts scarcely makes a compelling sermon. Politics? "The House of Commons has caught my ambitions and I have seen myself as a member of it," he wrote to his father. But with whom would he cast his lot and would they want him? And where and how should he get himself elected? A successful statesman or a pedantic schoolmaster? A priest or a writer? A celibate or a Don Juan? Anything but *this.*

In October he was iil again, this time with a skin infection with symptoms of extreme itch and weeping, like acute eczema. An English doctor came from Ootacumund and prescribed various ointments, all of

Copyrighted material

which aggravated the itching. By chance an Indian physician, who was visiting another patient at the college, heard of his predicament and looked in. Muggeridge had made inquiries about native medicine and had learned that if an Indian physician made a correct diagnosis the probability of cure was high; the trouble was that few were capable of making correct diagnoses.

> Presently he looked at my hands and my feet and my tongue and then he sat in silence rocking slowly to and fro. I thoughtlessly said something here but I was soon put to silence. For some quarter of an hour he sat like this. He was consulting his books and he carried them in his head. At last he spoke and his words were obviously intended to have the effect of an oracle: "The *Sahib* must put leaches on his hands" he said "to suck away the bad blood. He must eat gee and apply a preparation I shall send him." Then he went. I didn't put the leeches on—the very idea of it is revolting; and I certainly didn't eat gee (which is foully indigestible) but I may put on the curious inky thing he has sent me as a lotion.[18]

He did so, and his skin infection disappeared almost immediately.

He spent a morose Christmas, 1925, at the village of Tinevelly, staying with a Cambridge acquaintance, Stephen Neill, who had just been turned out of the mission he had come to India to serve. Neill's father was a doctor, and Muggeridge accompanied him to several nearby villages that had been struck by a cholera epidemic: "The village headman tells us chattily how many died the day before and how many have sickened that day. A little permanganate in the well would probably have prevented the whole thing. A mudheap of a world this that we live in."[19]

The sky was blue, the temperature hovered around one hundred degrees, and the English newspapers, which arrived weeks late with their pages stiff as boards from salty sea air, promised snow for Christmas. With his season's greetings to his family, he enclosed a poem that concluded:

> Two thousand years have passed of Church and King
> And vast has been the flow of blood and speech,
> But brothers do we know the simplest thing
> He died to teach?

Up until this time, his father's praise for Malcolm's literary efforts had been sparing, no doubt to avoid fanning the flames of unrealistic ambition, but also because he was genuinely out of sympathy with the passionate way in which his son wrote—his ecstasies and despairs, and his frequent references to sex. For some reason, this little poem made a

Copyrighted material

deep impression on H. T.; he copied it into his commonplace book of treasured literary quotations and wrote back to Malcolm that the poem was "brilliant" and the last verse "inspired." Malcolm lapped up such unexpected praise: "I don't think that I had ever been happier in my life than when I read in your letter that you had found something inspiring in my last verse. I imagined you saying it through to yourself and the thought of it was delicious. More and more all ambition and purpose for me crystallizes to this—to inspire by written words of mine. . . ."[20]

All the time at Alwaye he had been writing—poems, essays, short stories, fragments of a play, and a novel (called *Splendid People*). Now he redoubled his efforts. Inevitably he began to collect rejection slips. Discouraged, he remained persistent. On September 19, 1925, he wrote to his father: "How sad these little notices are. One waits and posts and waits; alternating between hope and despair; eternally running over in one's mind what one has written, wondering if it's good, wondering if it's stupid, but always rather leaning towards the former view. Then comes an envelope with the name of the paper on it. 'At any rate they have not returned the MS,' one thinks hopefully. One opens to find the above note. All is over with that then, but alas 'hope springs eternal' and the thing must be repeated again.

"I swear to you solemnly that I would infinitely rather settle down to being a perfectly good schoolmaster and have no more of this scribbling, but I simply can't do it. It's not so much ambition as it is necessity. I am almost sure that I shall never succeed—without any fatuous false modesty I doubt whether I have the ability to do so—and yet I shall go on forever trying."[21]

His first successes were modest enough; editorials and articles in the college magazine which he edited. Then *The Calcutta Guardian* ("A Christian Weekly of Public Affairs," according to its masthead) reprinted an article from the school magazine called "On The Loneliness of Being a Sahib" and invited him to submit more articles at ten rupees a time. He replied that he would write one essay per month for no fee and this he did, most of them unmemorable, on such light topics as "Riding on Trains" and "The Comic Opera Element in Indian Life." Some of these articles were reprinted abroad, and gradually his reputation and self-confidence grew. In September 1926, his father wrote to request an article for the Ruskin Hall magazine whose editor, McLeod, had expressed admiration for Malcolm's work and ". . . tactfully suggested that I am now getting known as the father of Malcolm (a reputation I enjoy better than any other)."

Money was never a motive for writing. In India he lived so frugally that his paltry salary was adequate enough. Any excess he gave away—a lifelong habit. He asked his father to raise the possibility of his

Copyrighted material

contributing a regular column to *The Daily Herald* and stipulated: "Of course, I shouldn't want any pay. I have enough to live on and, praise God, no ambition for more." H. T. did meet with the *Herald's* editor, Fyfe, but nothing came of it.

When he had completed an article or short story, he usually sent it back to his father in the hope that he might be able to find an English publisher. One of the first such stories, called "The Mess of Pottage," H. T. considered so sexually explicit that he refused to send it around. Malcolm was angry: "I feel that you are quite as unbalanced about sex, the other way, as I am," he wrote, and went on to lecture his father on how most of the world's great literature concerned this subject. Years later, however, in a controversy over the Booker Prize, he emulated his father's action by resigning as a judge rather than read through novels he regarded as little better than pornography. In any case, "The Mess of Pottage" was never published. Eventually, *The New Statesman* did publish several of his Indian articles, beginning with an unusually ponderous piece on Indian education that appeared on May 25, 1928, but by then he had left India.

For someone as determined to write as Muggeridge, to actually see one's own words in print is a kind of narcotic. First, the ecstatic high when, riffling anxiously through the pages, one comes upon it: One's own creation. Utter self-absorption as one reads it through. The sting of a misplaced comma; the anguish of a word omitted! Then a short-lived euphoria as one pronounces it good and imagines countless unknown people hurriedly scanning pages, their eyes momentarily arrested by your words, then slowly, attentively moving from side to side, lower and lower, as an appropriate look of acquiescence or awe or delight or enlightenment or hilarity spreads across their face. Like an orgasm, sharp and intense, this excitement soon passes, and one feels vacant and empty, a peculiarly desolate emptiness. The pangs of withdrawal set in, and no anodyne will serve to assuage them. No cold turkey either, for that means oblivion. One takes up pen or sits down before a typewriter with a resigned, almost fearful, knowledge that to get the same high next time, the dose will have to be increased or the product made purer, more refined.

At the beginning of 1926, Muggeridge's spirits temporarily perked up when it appeared that Alec Vidler might come to India. Vidler had been invited to become private chaplain to the Viceroy, Lord Irwin (later Lord Halifax), and to tutor his sons. Vidler considered it seriously but declined because he was then priest in charge of St. Aidans, Birmingham, and in the midst of a protracted, divisive controversy with Bishop E. W. Barnes over one of those small, dull differences that periodically ruffle the placid surface of Anglicanism. Despite personal

Copyrighted material

disappointment that his best friend would not be joining him in India, Muggeridge praised Vidler's decision: ". . . the powers that be are, by their very nature, in my eyes utterly immoral in this country—immoral in the sense that they are killing a people's soul, and I'm glad you aren't to be bound up with them."[22]

As the months dragged on, his resolve to leave Alwaye increased, and he gave notice in April that he would go the following March. He would need some sort of job back in England. "There are three kinds of jobs I should like," he wrote to his father: "(1) To be secretary to an MP—or almost anything connected with politics. (2) Journalism—any job on the staff of a Labour paper. (3) A teacher." He knew the first possibility was remote, even though he professed himself willing to sweep the floor at Labour party headquarters. The second, journalism, was unlikely, at least until his work and name became better known. So teaching, alas, it must be, and in August he enlisted Vidler's help to find a teaching position somewhere near Birmingham so that they might live together. Also, he made inquiries about enrolling for postgraduate studies in, of all things, economics. Having read the wrong subject as an undergraduate, he seemed determined to repeat his error as a postgraduate. Fortunately, like so many of his schemes at this time, nothing came of it, and the dismal science was left to Keynes and his contemporaries to wreak their particular brand of havoc through recessions, deficits, and inflated, worthless currency on an unsuspecting world.

Any lingering doubt he may have had about leaving India was laid to rest after an incident at the Sunday morning chapel service. His preaching turn had come round again. His previous sermons had caused a certain amount of disquiet, but the principal, K. C. Charcko (whose toleration of Muggeridge's disruptiveness can only have derived from genuine affection), had always come to his defense. Now he lost his last defender. The actual sermon he preached has disappeared, and all that exists are these references to it in a letter to his parents on August 6, 1926: "I preached a sermon last Sunday showing the dangers of making divinities of our great teachers—how that leads to fanaticism and divorcement of action from belief. All the great prophets of God have caused war and Hell in the world—Jesus, Mohammed and the others, but Socrates has not—why? Because no one has been foolish enough to regard him as a God, and yet in his words we find all the great moral truths that there are in the New Testament."

His sermon was pronounced "heretical," and Muggeridge was formally barred from ever again preaching in the chapel. He was not upset. In fact, he found the row hilarious, particularly such a ponderous defense of orthodoxy in so unlikely a setting. But it did serve to make

Copyrighted material

the already oppressive atmosphere of the place seem even more stifling.

His last months in India were spent teaching, writing, corresponding with prospective employers, and reading. His usually eclectic reading was now concentrated on books that might assist him in sorting out his religious position. He read *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Plato's dialogues, Marcus Aurelius, Albert Schweitzer, and several books on Eastern religions. He had decided that one must choose between a religion like Hinduism, which provided some logical, reasonable explanation of the universe, or one like Christianity, which gave a motive for good living. Christianity, it seemed, provided no answers; at its heart were unfathomable mysteries. In a world created by a loving God, why is there so much needless suffering? Given man's evil nature, why should God so concern Himself with our sordid affairs as to offer Himself in sacrifice for His own creation? The answers to questions like this, he came to believe, were obscured by the cloud of unknowing that is forever between man and God. Instead of answers, Christianity provided a way of living that related time to eternity, history to truth, a way by which God could appear in the flesh of a man and a man be crucified because He was God. It was less something to be understood—as one understands why two plus two make four—than something to be experienced—and then verified through the actual process of living. "Christianity is to life what Shakespeare is to literature," he wrote. "It envisages the whole. It sees the necessity for a man to have spiritual values and it shows him how to get at those through physical sacraments. . . . Your logical Hindu takes a circle for his divine symbol—a complete and rounded and satisfying thing—but we take an ungainly, unsymmetrical cross—a bare jagged gibbet, as a paradoxical expression of a paradoxical faith."[23]

He was beginning to develop a view of Christianity as remote from the formulas of the evangelical missionaries as it was from the Anglo-Catholicism of Oratory House; it was unique, it was precious, and the rest of his life would be spent fitfully trying to escape it or express it. He would not then, nor perhaps ever, have said that he had a faith; rather he had a way of looking at life and of relating himself to it and to its Creator. He imagines putting his position to God in these terms: "Sire, though I am prepared to help you all I can—to accept the sacrificial way of living; yet because you have not shown me all I cannot do all. My faith is that as I see what is good and true and beautiful, I may find strength to live them, to speak them, to write them, to apply them, to oppose what seems to me to blaspheme them; and, if necessary, to die for them. Beyond this the responsibility is yours; for, if you will pardon my indelicacy in reminding you of such a sad matter, you, either in frolic or madness or in some mood too deep for me to understand, did in

Copyrighted material

fact make this mudheap, and impose on me limitations whereby I do see darkly only."[24]

Originally, he planned an ambitious route home that would have taken him up the Persian Gulf to Baghdad, across the desert to Beirut, on foot through Egypt and the Holy Land, from Alexandria to Italy, and then back to England. Miss Hopwood, the evangelical spinster who had nursed him at Farley, intended to accompany him as far as Alexandria, and he idly wondered if their combined experiences might yield material for a travel book. But a closer check of his finances revealed that he had saved practically nothing in India, so the longer route had to be scrapped. Instead he booked passage on an Orient line, the S.S. *Otranto*, leaving Colombo on March 23, 1927, and docking in Naples on April 8.

Meanwhile, his father asked McIntyre, Hogg and Marsh if he might have a two-week holiday to surprise his son at Naples. This arranged, he wrote to Alec Vidler:

> You will, I think, find Malcolm greatly altered—more of a responsible man and less of the wild youth.
>
> He is learning how to use his pen. He had quite a lot of his writing published in India. He only wants more and deeper experience of life to make him, I hope, an inspirer of good causes, and a help to struggling souls.
>
> His verse, I sometimes think, is his best stuff. It has marks in it of sandstorm. His spirit is one that will never be quiet. He has Hell to go through and I could wish for no one to be near him so much as you. His sympathy with the poor and miserable is intense, but he has to learn that he mustn't let it burn his soul and sanity out. He must master his emotions, not be mastered by them, and so fritter away his strength (if I am not mistaken in thinking he has much) in mere protests and declamations.[25]

Muggeridge's final days at Alwaye were clouded by another row, this time over a critical article he wrote on unemployment among university graduates, which seemed to mock Indian education in general and Alwaye college in particular. The anger of the authorities was understandable; not only had he called the teachers "dead" and their lessons "artificial"—"wax hyacinths and pink paper roses imported from the West"—but the article specifically identified its author as a faculty member at Union Christian College, Alwaye. The principal cancelled a planned farewell party (although one wonders why, since, under the circumstances, his departure ought to have been an occasion for rejoicing) but still came and shook him by the hand and said that he had made a unique contribution to the life of the college and would be

Copyrighted material

welcomed back at any time. By the time he went back, four decades had passed; the principal was dead, and the college, India, and the world were vastly changed places.

The journey from Alwaye to Colombo had to be made by foot, boat and train. Muggeridge was delighted to have his friend, Venkatranam, accompany him as far as Allepey. They left the day after term ended with Muggeridge clutching a stack of unmarked examination papers under his arm. As the boat drifted downstream, he graded each paper and then chucked it overboard. As the pile of papers progressively diminished, he threw them with ever greater abandon, as one might fling the last confetti at a departing bride. The papers floated briefly on the backwater and the ink ran, blurring the scribbled words and phrases that he had first spoken in an open-sided classroom; words and phrases dutifully committed to memory and now being carried about in the heads of newly minted graduates, ready, should occasion arise, to be repeated verbatim. As the boat moved on, the papers sank from sight beneath the surface without so much as a bubble rising to mark their descent to the primeval mud of India. In his ebullient mood, no student failed.

Copyrighted material

·4·
EGYPT and The GUARDIAN

Always I seem to take up impossible loyalties that break down and then I am stranded. All my enthusiasms seem to have been such failures.

Malcolm Muggeridge to Alec Vidler, August 25, 1925

* * *

It was shorter and pleasanter to come back from India than to go there. On April 8, 1927, Muggeridge met up with his father, to whom (along with Alec Vidler) he had written faithfully every week; the intimacy of their correspondence is more suggestive of brothers than of father and son. In Naples they stayed at a *pension* on the Piazza Amedeo, then journeyed on to Rome and Paris. In Paris they were entertained by a travel agent who was an acquaintance of H.T.'s. The evening's entertainment turned out to be lewd, and the hostess of the establishment, clad only in high heels and a diaphanous scarf, came and perched on H. T.'s lap. More from embarrassment than encouragement, H. T. gave her a pound note that she proceeded to stick in her shoe, that being the only readily available receptacle. Later, as they both trudged back along the Champs Elyseés, Malcolm could hear his father muttering over to himself: " 'Her shoe! She put it in her shoe.'

"I looked sidelong at my father—his head, as ever, a little tilted in defiance, the wings of his city collar whitely protruding, his outsize bowler down on his ears, and felt a pang of deep, anguished affection for him."[1]

Once back in England, Muggeridge went to stay with Alec Vidler, then living in a clergy house at Small Heath in Birmingham. Although one of his last letters had expressed "dread" that ". . . my complete driftage away from Christianity may estrange us,"[2] it did not prove so. The reunion was a happy one, and their friendship only matured and grew deeper.

Copyrighted material

Vidler had arranged some supply teaching work for Muggeridge with the Birmingham Education Authority. Initially, he had little heart for such temporary stop-gap employment. Yet gradually, perhaps because of the unpredictable nature of the work, never knowing when a sickness, death, resignation, or pregnancy would lead to his being dispatched, he came to enjoy it. It had a certain, nomadic quality that suited him. He was usually at a school just long enough to appreciate the students and too briefly to antagonize the masters.

On July 2, 1927, he was sent to what was then the worst school in the heart of industrial Birmingham. Its little asphalt courtyard was surrounded by belching chimneys that obscured the sun; the walls were gritty and black with the accumulated filth of generations. He wrote:

> The children were puny and, in feature, curiously aged. There was a weariness about some of their eyes, and lines in some of their faces, which one usually associates only with a world-weary middle age. They seemed to have plunged into tragedy when most of us know only days of careless freedom in the forest of Arden. Winter, with them, had set in desperately early.
>
> But with all this the school was full of happiness. There was something real about it; a flavour of the sacredness that comes only when things are being made. It was as though human life felt itself, in such conditions, put upon its metal, and determined therefore to show us all what it was capable of. For these children who were herded together at night—four, five, six in one room; many of whom came breakfastless to school, and had, for mid-day meal, only a hunk of bread; who had been bullied and harassed from earliest recollections; who, instead of a sky—and how may we know God if we are prevented from seeing his eyes?—looked up to a smoky pall, and instead of trees and grass and all the infinite sweetness of nature found around them blackened bricks shutting them in like a prison; these were good at their work, good at their play and good in themselves. There was a boy there, with a face like an angel, who was one of seventeen living in four rooms. He showed me a composition he had written about a brook; and, in all his life he had never seen one. There was another who recited, with passionate fervour, a poem about gold dust—a gold dust that, dropped in a man's eye, made all this mudheap radiant. And he had six brothers, and his father sold matches in the streets, and had, two days before, been put in jail for begging; while his mother had lost some wretched casual job she had by attending at the police court.
>
> . . . Just as I left three urchins from the top standard—louts of Punch's vicious drawings—brought in a sparrow in a hat. It was injured and they were afraid that it might die. I fear I wept at this, for their kindness to the little bird made the world's unkindness to them seem the more cruel. "Strange" said the head "that a creature with wings should come here."
>
> I would advise anyone who still believes that there is a difference in kind between the cultured and the uncultured; between the neat coated and the

Copyrighted material

> ragged coated, to visit one of these slum elementary schools, for there even the most dense cannot fail to see clearly that God, like the birds, never sings out of tune.[3]

There was more to this incident than a mere rekindling of the socialist ideals to which his father had devoted his life. It had this effect, and he did take up the possibility of a political career with influential Labour party stalwarts to whom H. T. introduced him. But of more lasting importance is what it reveals of his attitude toward deprivation and suffering, an attitude that has changed little throughout his life.

For many people suffering is the major stumbling block on the road to Christian faith. It has never been so for Muggeridge. Although his family circumstances were comfortable enough, he is no stranger to poverty or affliction; in fact he has been surrounded by both for most of his life—in childhood by the indigents of Croydon who sought his father's assistance; in India and in Egypt; in Russia at the height of the famine; during wartime; in later years through his association with one of the few saints of this sordid century, Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Muggeridge sees suffering as something basic and integral to human life, like sharps and flats are to music. Take away sharps and flats, and there is no music; take away suffering, and there is no life. The point is not to single out individual notes and debate their whys and wherefores, but rather to catch the melody of the whole composition. Life is, to use his friend Anthony Powell's evocative phrase, a dance to the music of time in which he who strains may hear secret harmonies.

The key to Muggeridge's attitude is that he envisages life not as a *scientific,* but as an *artistic* creation; God's action in making us and our world and our universe was, as it were, comparable to Shakespeare's writing *King Lear.* As one cannot fully understand drama apart from the dramatist, so one cannot understand life, in all its vicissitudes, apart from God. This is not to suggest that we can now, or perhaps ever, fully grasp our Creator's mysterious purposes, any more than one sees the dénouement of a play midway through the third act. But from the first moment when King Lear's folly leads him to mistake Regan's and Goneril's humbug for Cordelia's genuine love, the discerning eye senses rather than sees the outlines of a dark, foreboding future. So one may sense or, as Saint Paul put it—"see through a glass darkly," how contemporary man who turns his back on a drama in which suffering is an essential part and harkens instead to the sedulous voices of doctors and eugenicists who promise to eliminate suffering, perhaps even death itself, is fashioning a tragedy by his own hand. Hence Muggeridge's opposition to all those who would presume to decide who shall live and who shall die in the womb; also his scorn for heart

Copyrighted material

transplants and the various bizarre proposals to sort out and rearrange our genes so that everyone will become superman and wonderwoman. One can no more eliminate suffering from life, Muggeridge believes, than one can eliminate suffering from *King Lear* and still have a play. For this he is often accused of incorrigible pessimism, although no view of life could actually be more clearheaded and sanguine. It is those who imagine that life can be bent to conform with their own vain hopes and aspirations, and whose disillusionment when this fails, as fail it must, knows no bounds, who are the rankest pessimists. Nor has Muggeridge's view been shaken either by personal tragedy in his own life (such as the death of his son Charles at the age of twenty), nor by close association with the most wretched of humanity, at least in material terms, such as the flotsam and jetsam of Calcutta to whom Mother Teresa ministers daily.

In 1963 Muggeridge appeared on a BBC program on which he discussed his view of suffering. This brought in many letters, some from people who had triumphed over apalling adversity, others from those who had lost their religious faith by the experience of observing or attending a suffering loved one. One particularly poignant letter came from a mother whose twenty-two-year-old son had died during an operation to close a heart perforation. "Where is your God," she wrote, "and why does he allow such things to happen?" He replied: "Where is my God? Dear Mrs. ---, he is everywhere; even in the hole in your son's heart or nowhere.

"No one who has been spared—certainly not I—dare say to the afflicted that they are blessed in their affliction, or offer comfort in universal terms for particular griefs. Yet one can dimly see and humbly say that suffering is an integral and essential part of our human drama. That it falls upon one and all in differing degrees and forms whose comparison lies beyond our competence. That it belongs to God's purpose for us here on earth, so that in the end, all the experience of living has to teach us is to say: Thy will be done. To say it standing before a cross; itself signifying the suffering of God in the person of a man, and the redemption of man in the person of God. The greatest sorrow and the greatest joy co-existing on Golgotha."[4]

Whether or not this answer served to assuage the bereaved mother, it does verge on ". . . offering comfort in universal terms for particular griefs." This is inevitable. Words carry no anaesthetizing power; they cannot lessen the physical pain of the sufferer. At most, if they are good words and true, they help one to comprehend suffering, to put it into an understandable perspective that makes its ravages bearable. Like his mentor, William Blake, Muggeridge believes that "man was made for joy and woe" and that, once grasped, "through the world we safely go."

Copyrighted material

It must be added that he practices what he preaches: From tiny eccentricities, like refusing anaesthetic for dental fillings or extractions, to being resolute and undeflected by deaths of loved ones, personal tragedy, criticism, or scorn, he is a man who has resolutely made his way through a troubled, dangerous world.

When he was not teaching or writing in Birmingham, he was pacing aimlessly about the streets intent on watching the passing faces. If it was morning he observed the bustle of, in those days, mostly men as they made their way to work, newspapers folded under their arms, piling into trams, with occasional traces of breakfast—it might be a patch of egg white or a sliver of marmalade—still clinging to their lips. In the evening they returned, funneling out of the trams to drift off in every direction, like an ocean emptying its waters into innumerable rivers and tributaries. Then they looked tired and grubby, but relieved by a certain air of complacency that another day in their lives was finished. At night, other passersby, young men in tailored suits arm-in-arm with women in short skirts who walked up and down the pavements past the closed shops, sometimes turning into one of the two garishly illuminated cinemas, sometimes into noisy pubs, a few couples searching out dark alleyways or unlit street corners to pummel and claw and coax a little relief of that same lust that burned intensely in him.

He had seen Dora once or twice since returning from India, but there was no spark of romance left. This is hardly surprising. Although very attractive, she now seemed to Malcolm a shallow and immature girl whose ambition, judging from her letters to him, was to marry, acquire a suburban home with a little, symmetrical garden, and raise three children who would be expected to do the same. Her values were "petty bourgeois," as scornful a term of abuse as his vocabulary then contained. He broke off the relationship by the indirect but final expedient of marrying someone else. Nearly fifty years later he learned that Dora was in severe financial trouble because of protracted litigation with a former landlord; with characteristic generosity, he paid all her legal bills. Shortly after, Dora died.

In August 1927, he went to Belgium to visit the Dobbs family whom he had met when working as a tour guide there. His memoirs imply that there was no forethought to this trip: "On an impulse, I decided to go over to the Belgium coast again . . . ."[5] It seems more probable that he went with the explicit and carefully considered purpose of raising his stock among the influential socialists he was then, with one eye on the political horizon, assiduously courting. In fact, looking back on this time, a diary entry in 1936 says: "The family's aristocratic connections obsessed me somewhat. I liked to think about them." One of Mrs.

Copyrighted material

Dobbs's sisters was Lady Courtney whose husband had been a member of parliament, a *Times* leader writer and, after 1906, a peer. Another sister, Beatrice Webb, was to the socialist "movement," as it was then still called, roughly speaking what Jefferson was to the American framers of the Declaration of Independence. Although less influential in socialist circles, Kitty's mother, Mrs. Dobbs, was a weird, lovable woman who had met her husband, George Dobbs, while wandering aimlessly about Europe and settled down to live with him in what Kitty once described as "not unreasonable strife." Muggeridge has drawn an unforgettable portrait of Mrs. Dobbs in his memoirs.

Malcolm had originally met Kitty Dobbs when he shared rooms with her brother Leonard in his last year at Cambridge. He had seen her only once or twice since then. Suddenly it was announced that they would be married within a month. Everyone was astonished, not least Kitty's father who considered Malcolm an unworthy match and tried his best to dissuade Kitty. Alec Vidler, who was away from Birmingham on vacation, received a terse note on August 11: "I'm going to be married on September 10. I know it sounds ridiculous but there it is."

Actually, it was not out of character. In contrast to the way his father acted, Malcolm rarely deliberates over personal decisions. He is inclined to rash, precipitate action on those matters that most people regard as critical, on which they take advice, agonize, resolve in a qualified way, and then fret over. On the other hand, on issues that many people regard as self-evident, progress, say, or universal suffrage or censorship, he broods interminably, without ever formulating a fixed, clear position. In a sense, he had predicted how his marriage would come about two years before when he wrote to Vidler: "I fear I shall marry one day in a burst of enthusiasm—for when I am in love I am convinced of its sincerity—and make some poor female unhappy. I might catch a Tartar in which case we should make each other unhappy."[6]

His memoirs are not particularly revealing about the exact circumstances of their engagement:

> It somehow became understood that Kitty and I would get married and quite soon. I cannot recall ever "proposing" to her—something we should both have regarded as very bourgeois and conventional; terms of abuse in our vocabulary. Nor can I remember any moment of decision; or, for that matter, of indecision. Free will, in my experience, is tactical rather than strategic; in all the larger shaping of a life, there is a plan already, into which one has no choice but to fit, or contract out of living altogether. So, it was borne in upon me that Kitty and I belonged together; that somehow, to me, the shape and sense and sound of her existence in the universe would always be appreciable in every corner of it, and through all eternity.

Copyrighted material

> To this essential proposition all sorts of other hopes, desires, appetites, egotistic aspirations, corporeal needs and mental strivings, were attached, like subordinate clauses; sex being one of these.[7]

On the day appointed, their union was solemnized at the Birmingham Registry office. Only one guest was invited, she to serve as the essential witness; however, Mr. Dobbs turned up uninvited and reluctantly gave the bride away: "When, in the course of the ceremony, the Registrar put the crucial question, he intervened sharply, telling her in a loud voice that there was still time for her to withdraw."[8] As soon as the formal ceremony was concluded, Malcolm inquired of the registrar how one went about getting a divorce. Happily, this information proved unnecessary; despite the squalls and tempests that lay ahead, their marriage was to be enduring. After lunch they returned briefly to Small Heath where they found a check for fifteen guineas, intended as a wedding present from Mr. Dobbs's employer, Sir Henry Lunn. To Malcolm's horror, Kitty ripped it up on the grounds that Sir Henry was a despicable character. After they had gone, the other residents managed to collect and piece it together, but the check was never cashed.

They stayed five days in Croydon (no doubt to atone for Malcolm's callousness in not inviting his parents to the wedding), then a week in Paris, and a few days with the Dobbs's at Montreux in the Swiss Alps near Lake Geneva. At the beginning of October, they were back in Birmingham in a two-room flat near the outskirts, for which they paid one pound a week rent. "It was an impermanent household, with coloured lampshades, and sincere conversation, and hired, untidy furniture."[9] Neighbors looked askance when, in the early morning, Malcolm and Kitty were to be seen dancing barefoot in the recreation ground opposite.

They had hardly settled in before Mr. Dobbs, by now reconciled to the marriage, drew Malcolm's attention to a newspaper advertisement for teachers in Egypt. It meant steady employment and a dependable income. He applied and was accepted. They packed up what few belongings they possessed, mostly books, and set off for Minia in upper Egypt, by way of Paris, Genoa, Alexandria, and Cairo. To Vidler, he wrote: "It seems strange to be at large again after so short a stay in England. But there it is. When I move about I feel that my one desire in life is to be quiet in one place; and when I'm quiet in one place I only want to get away from it. That's what comes of having no religion."[10]

In Cairo they waited at the station for the train to Minia. It was late afternoon, early in November 1927, and the glancing rays of the sun bathed the vaulted glass roof and steel girders and platforms in a gentle,

Copyrighted material

soft light. Porters squatted nonchalantly, only stirring themselves when a train arrived. Hawkers were everywhere, pleading, flattering, cajoling travelers to buy trinkets, sticky circular cakes, cigarettes, and nuts. The newlyweds strolled up and down the platform, happy with each other and content with whatever fate awaited them. Malcolm wrote in his ever present notebook: "The trains come out of the sunset, and their carriages, as they pass slowly by, are like the years of one's life: seemingly endless, yet inevitably and at last coming to an end."

Teaching in a government secondary school in Minia, he might almost have been back at Alwaye. Here the classroom had walls, but one could still look away over the cultivated fields to the Nile and beyond to the yellow desert that turned a sullen brown when the sun dipped behind the hills. The voices of men singing in the fields drifted in through the open windows. Again, a gavotte with English literature before another lot of blank faces and inert minds.

> "Sir, what is meant by 'I see a lily on thy brow/With anguish moist and fever dew'?"
>
> "His forehead is pale—white like a lily you know; and he is hot with fever and pain, so he perspires, and the perspiration is like dew."
>
> "But, sir, what is perspiration?"
>
> "Sweat."
>
> "Ah, yes."

Instead of Little Dowden, he read from *Man and His Work*, a presentation of human achievement in the form of facts, set out in statistical tables and dry, arid prose. The bell for lunch promised momentary relief, only to be followed, too soon, by another bell calling for the afternoon performance. If a sudden plague should kill off all the masters and students, he reflected, the bells would continue to ring automatically. The heat of the afternoon made thought heavy and speech forced and movement painful. Some of the boys would fall asleep, their heads lolling forward, occasionally emitting a croak or snore. At three o'clock, more bells, these as welcome as the trumpets that sounded for Bunyan's pilgrim when at last he crossed over.

In the evenings he walked by the Nile, or sat at his typewriter, or he and Kitty took turns reading aloud. It is a fundamental article of faith to him that the ultimate test of a book is how well it reads aloud; *Madame Bovary* stood up so well that he proclaimed it ". . . easily the most wonderful novel I have ever read." He and Kitty were happy—at least ". . . as happy as people like us ever can be."[11] Marriage suited him,

Copyrighted material

and in its first charms, he wrote: "It is as though all my days were suddenly flooded with a golden light, making them rich and beautiful."[12]

His general contentment was bolstered by increasing literary success. His articles were finding more receptive and prestigious publishers, particularly *The New Statesman*, which in socialist circles was accorded canonical status. He was beginning to synthesize what he had seen and experienced in India and Egypt and was forming a mature, more comprehensive view of imperialism, power, and world affairs. His writing had become self-assured and was already taking on a distinctive prophetic quality; in a truly astonishing number of cases, his prophecies would be borne out by events.

In October 1928, his article "Subject Peoples" appeared. The British Empire, and with it the whole concept of imperialism, collapsed so quickly and irretrievably that it is difficult now to remember that in 1928 it appeared omnipotent and impregnable and was confidently spoken of by many as divinely ordained to continue forever. Muggeridge wrote:

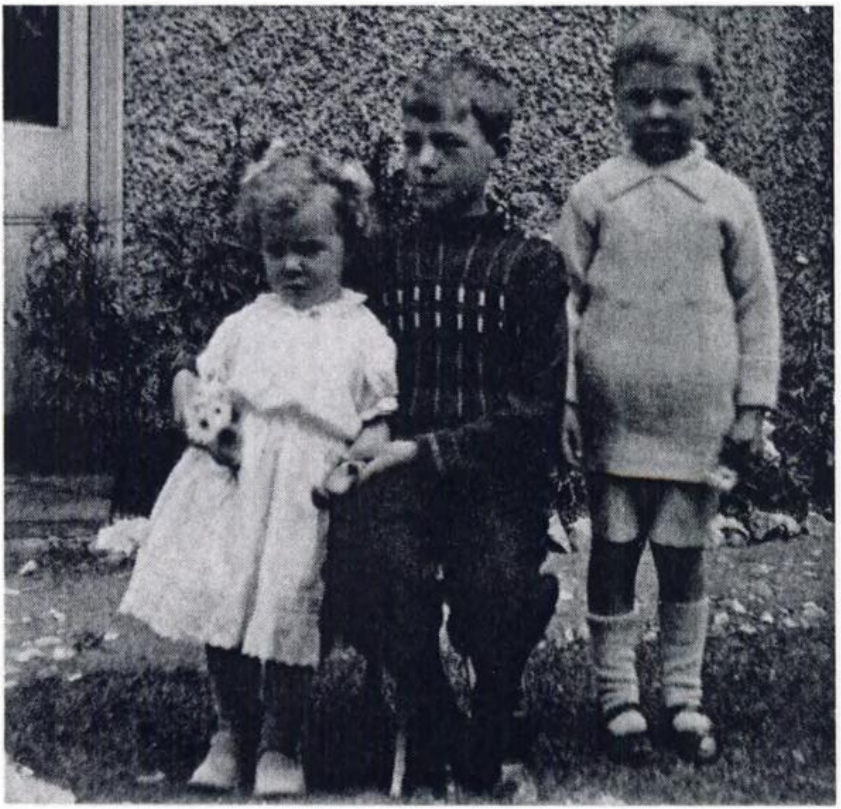
> We have to face the fact that there is today a stirring of subject peoples all over the world. They are demanding the right to govern their own destinies in their own way. Egypt for the Egyptians, they say; and India for the Indians; and China for the Chinese.
>
> . . . There can be no doubt that the subject peoples will go on demanding concession after concession, and that the Powers will be forced to give way to them. The only thing is that the more graciously they give way the better it will be for all concerned. And the half-way houses will be dangerous and uncomfortable. They always are. There is that amount of truth in the contention of the die-hard as against that of the sentimental liberal—it must be a steel frame or nothing: wooden scaffolding is useless. And nothing it will, of course, be in the end; in much the same way that in the end the labouring classes in England had to be given the right to vote, not because it was particularly good for them or for England that they should have it, but because it was in their souls to demand it; and what is in a man's soul is invariably achieved.
>
> Reaching this end, however, would seem to be a weary, wrangling process, full of hartals and strikes and wars and bloody revolutions.[13]

In the spring of 1928, two events changed the Muggeridges', by now, rather placid lives. First, Kitty became pregnant, an apparently unanticipated event: "The real joke, Alec, about birth control is that there is no such thing. And I'm rather glad."[14] Then Malcolm was invited to join the English faculty of the Egyptian University in Cairo, at that time headed by Bonamy Dobrée.

Copyrighted material

At three months;
winner of Mellin's Baby Food Prize

Malcolm at five; brother Eric, Stanley and Malcolm (left to right) outside Croydon home



Copyrighted material

This biography of Malcolm Muggeridge traces the varied life of one of the most brilliant and controversial men of the twentieth century. The author, Ian Hunter, was given full access to all of Muggeridge's unpublished material, letters, and diaries. The result is an objective, well-researched, and honest account that is sometimes at variance with Muggeridge's own recollection of events. Ian Hunter captures the humor, the intellect, the rawness of perception, the abandoned honesty of a man engaged in knowing himself, his world, and his God.

Malcolm Muggeridge was not merely a "vendor of words," as he invariably described himself, but was also a celebrated author, broadcaster, lecturer, debater, traveller, journalist and television personality, a one-time ardent admirer of the Soviet system, a World War II intelligence agent, and a former agnostic turned committed Christian. To many people, however, Malcolm Muggeridge was admired above all for his superb use of the English language. It is to the credit of Ian Hunter that after reading this biography one has a clearer understanding of an extraordinary man.

IAN HUNTER is professor emeritus at the University of Western Ontario. His articles and reviews have appeared in many Canadian and American publications. Dr. Hunter has edited two collections of Muggeridge's writings: *Things Past* and *The Very Best of Malcolm Muggeridge*; he has also written a biography of Muggeridge's friend, Hesketh Pearson (*Nothing to Repent: The Life of Heskerth Pearson*).

Regent College Publishing
www.regentpublishing.com

ISBN 1-57383-259-6
90000
9 781573 833585

Copyrighted material