

PROFILES IN FAITH

Malcolm Muggeridge (1903–1990)

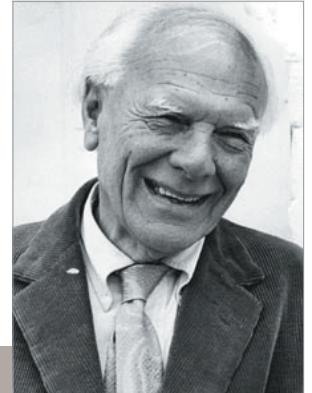
“Mr. Valiant-for-Truth”: Reminiscences of a Friendship

by James M. Houston

Senior Fellow, C.S. Lewis Institute

Founder of Regent College (Vancouver, B.C.) and

Professor of Spiritual Theology (retired)



Thomas Malcolm Muggeridge was born in 1903, named by his father Henry after Thomas Carlyle. A lover of words, Malcolm was to become one of the great literary figures of British public life in the twentieth century. After the death of C.S. Lewis in 1963, many came to regard Muggeridge as Lewis' successor as a Christian popular apologist. Although he grew up in an atheistic environment, Malcolm admitted to me that he had always believed in God, vague though his religious convictions remained for a long time in his life. One can trace this search for God in reading his diary¹ and other of his works from the 1930s.

Malcolm's eldest son, Leonard (born in 1928), had become an evangelical as a member of the Plymouth Brethren while in the British army in Austria, during the early 1960s. I had gotten to know Leonard when he attended an annual summer biblical conference I had helped to organize in Oxford. Through him I was introduced to his father, after he had resigned as rector of Edinburgh University. A friendship then continued with Malcolm and later his wife Kitty, from 1968 until a few years before Malcolm died in 1990.

Malcolm came from a poor home, with an illiterate mother and a father whose career as a socialist member of Parliament was brief. In spite of this background, Malcolm was educated at Cambridge and became a journalist. He had a great love of words, pouring out millions of them.² Like his father, he had a passion for “truth,” but living among the rich and the famous, he had much greater opportunity to become quixotic, and either hated or idolized. His wife, Kitty, was the niece of Beatrice Webb, whose biography she wrote.³ Beatrice and her husband, Sidney (Lord Passfield), established the London School of Economics, founding Fabians, many of whose ideas were later popularized in the socialist society blueprint of Lord Beveridge.

Kitty told me that, as a child, her Aunt Beatrice became emotionally attached to the “father figure” of Herbert Spencer, a frequent visitor to their home. His social Darwinism, she said, seduced Beatrice's childhood Christian faith. When Malcolm and Kitty got married in 1927, in a registry office, Kitty's father pleaded with his daughter not to sign the document with “Red Malcolm,” while his own parents knew nothing of the event until later. Marrying into “the monarchy of Socialism,” while despising his own parental working class socialism, was just the beginning of the many paradoxes of Malcolm's life. A previous short time in India and a meeting with Gandhi set Malcolm's path towards a more mystical-religious way of life. In contrast, the socialism of the Webbs was bureaucratic, rationalistic, and theoretical, which he detested ever after. For as he told me, it saw all of life under neon-lighting: the sun and the heavens never penetrated whatever inner world the Webbs might have had.

After a short assignment in Egypt—then in political turmoil—Malcolm came back to Manchester in England to work for the newspaper, the *Manchester Guardian*, then one of Britain's most influential media. He found its editor, C.P. Scott, “a little mad, high-minded, who fed on moral problems, fattened on moral problems, jumped out of bed in the morning to struggle with them, reluctantly extricated himself from their clasp when he went to bed at night. His whole life had been one moral problem after another.”⁴ This also was repeated in Muggeridge's own family life; until the late 1960s, it was a catalogue of marital unfaithfulness, sailing near the wind for libel actions, despairing to the point of a timid attempt at suicide, and living in the half mad world of the eccentrically famous.

In 1932-33, Malcolm and Kitty spent seven months in Russia, leaving behind in boarding school their four-year-old son, Leonard. Contrary to popular opinion,

Malcolm was never infatuated with socialism, so he went to Russia prepared to be skeptical of the communist utopia being depicted in the leftist press. What he suspected was that it was power-hungry journalists who envied Stalin's use of power, not romantic idealists. Knowing his candid reports about Russia would be unpopular in the leftist press in Britain, he wrote a novel in 1934, *Winter in Moscow*, which was a brilliant exposé of the willful credulity of Western journalists and of "mystified scientism" about Russia. Thinly veiled autobiography, the character "Wraithby" depicts Muggeridge's own state of mind at the time: "He was a dim, fitful person. Floating loose on society; making little darts, like a bee in search of honey, at newspaper offices and literature and politics and love affairs, and then hastily withdrawing into himself; interested in the world and in human affairs, but having contact with neither; carried this way and that by changing emotions and convictions, he had observed from afar the Dictatorship of the Proletariat and had felt it to be substantial. He knew that it was brutal, intolerant, and ruthless. He had no illusions about its consequences to individuals and to classes. Only, he thought, it offered a way of escape from himself. It was Brahma; an infinite; and by becoming one with it he would cease to be finite."⁵

Almost religiously, Malcolm hoped it would be a baptism and a rebirth for him, like "a sea that would cradle him." It was the quest for clear, authoritative "truth" in a liberal world which had lost its moral moorings. Returning via Germany, he realized the Nazi show of force was the same, "brown terror" no worse than "red terror." Already he predicted in 1933 there would be war in the West, and his critique of communism was years ahead of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

The years 1935-38 were bleak years for Muggeridge, feeling demeaned as a reporter working for a London tabloid, *The Londoner's Diary*: it was all about gossip and the satirical portraiture of public figures. Then in 1936 he went into work as a freelance writer, meeting many of the upcoming writers of the time. He also became more articulate on his religious quest, recognizing that it alone could sustain true individuality, in avoiding both the isolation of materialism and the false brotherhood of totalitarianism. But it was the institutional container of the religious life that always bothered him, with its inevitable deprivations of personal life and faith. Among the works he wrote in this period was an autobiographical pilgrimage, *In the Valley of the Restless Mind* (1938). Its bleak vignettes depicted a civilization in decline, only sustainable by satirical detachment. With the outbreak of the war in 1939, Muggeridge immediately joined the army, was commissioned as an officer, and was then recruited

into the Special Intelligence Services, or MI6. Sent out to Mozambique, he entered into a tumultuous period of his life, with sex, booze, intrigue, and guilt. It was then he made his suicide attempt in July 1943, was sent home, and after a brief assignment in Paris, once the war was over, joined the *Daily Telegraph*. After an assignment in Washington, D.C., he returned to London, adding to his literary activities, and becoming the editor of *Punch* in 1952. Then two years later he was appointed as an interviewer with the BBC, and his television career was launched.⁶

It was typical of the man that he got bored with every job he took on, so that he lasted scarcely five years at *Punch*. His political satire against the icons of his day also frequently embarrassed those who hired his services. As a result he also lost old friends, especially after his resignation as rector of Edinburgh University and his public embrace of the Christian faith. Yet Muggeridge had long recognized that the greatest divide in society was not between those politically "right" or "left," but of those who believed in God and those who did not. He saw, too, that the idolization of political leaders, whether of Churchill or of Kennedy, filled a secular vacuum for those who did not believe in God. As an outstanding lampoonist of society, Muggeridge observed in 1964 that "the only fun of journalism was that it puts you in contact with the eminent without being under the necessity to admire them or take them seriously."⁷

After his BBC film on Mother Teresa in Calcutta in 1969, Michael Chantry, the chaplain at Hertford College (where I was a Fellow), invited him to preach one Sunday evening in Michaelmas term. His visit aroused unusual interest, as well as considerable hostility, in the public debate that followed the chapel service. Escorting him to his room, I put my arm around him, and reminded him that, like the apostle Paul, he would doubtless receive a lot of ridicule for now becoming "St. Mugg," after all the mockery of the established church and the loose moral life he had previously exhibited. He began to invite me down to Robertsbridge, his home near Brighton. Sitting on the couch in the living room after lunch one day with Leonard, as Malcolm had his afternoon nap by the fireside, Leonard asked me, "Do you think Dad has become a Christian yet?" I noticed a suppressed smile on what should have been a sleeping face while I was assuring his son, "Yes, I think he's there now." Malcolm never interpreted his conversion as a single event, but as a life-long journey, helped along by many writers—William Blake, George Herbert, Blaise Pascal, and Simone Weil, among others. For he saw Christian faith more as a living drama than as a series of doctrines. Often I asked him when he was going to write his third volume, *Chronicles of Wasted*

Time, about his conversion. He never did, and instead wrote a separate work, in a differing genre.⁸

It was the great cultural sweep of Muggeridge's literary life that made him more a prophet than an apologist. I suggested he should be invited to address the Lausanne Evangelical Congress instead of Henry Kissinger, who had originally been proposed. But Malcolm found it all rather uncomfortable. Put up at the luxurious Beau-Sejour Hotel, a well-known religious television personality strolled up the first morning to his breakfast table, coming straight to his offer: \$50,000 for a television program. When Malcolm declined, and a double fee was suggested, Muggeridge retorted, as if facing the devil in the wilderness, "Go away you nasty man!" Ruffled by the encounter, he was met in the foyer by Billy Graham, who asked solicitously how he had slept. "Very well, thank you, but I doubt whether Jesus would have done so." His first meeting with Francis Schaeffer at L'Abri likewise did not go too well, since he knew he was to be quizzed as to how soundly he had been converted. But Schaeffer's ardency to express his own views left no space for any response from Muggeridge.

So as we walked around the shore of Lake Geneva, his first impression of evangelicals was that they were like modern skyscrapers, designed monolithically, to have no gargoyles. Whereas medieval cathedrals had gargoyles everywhere: at the drainage points of the roof, and carved at the end of the pews. His point was that religiously we need much humor and should never take ourselves too seriously in claiming to do the work of God.

Early in 1975, Malcolm was resident on Salt Spring Island, near Vancouver, writing his book, *Jesus: The Man Who Lives*.⁹ I kept him stocked with reference books, and my wife and I would visit him each weekend to hear him read the script as he progressed. In contrast to his previous book of essays, *Jesus Rediscovered* (1966), when he was still searching, his mood was then penitential about "those empty years, those empty words, that empty passion!"¹⁰ Now in *Jesus: The Man Who Lives*, he was ready to embrace the God-Man, in joyous assurance, after having already witnessed in the saintly life of Mother Teresa, *Something Beautiful for God* (1971).

Much has been speculated about Malcolm and Kitty's entry into the Roman Catholic church. After their admittance in 1982, I suggested to John Stott that the two of us should visit them. On the railway platform at Charing Cross station, we met Lord Longford, their old-time friend and neighbor, who had knelt with them in his chapel, where they had become members. "Well now," he said, "you chaps can tell me, why did Malcolm become a Catholic?" We laughed at the irony

of his question, when he was largely responsible for making it so easy for them to join. But as we journeyed towards Robertsbridge, we all agreed the factors were not really theological at all.

First, they were aware of their mortality, and needed a priest soon, to officiate at their burial. But Malcolm had told me more than once that the local Anglican church had no appeal. Then the Catholic priest Fr. Bidone, on Lord Longford's estate, had a community of mentally retarded people whom the Muggeridges loved, and who comprised a large part of the local church. There was Mother Teresa's influence, which had been so significant in their pilgrimage to faith. He also respected the Catholic church's stand against abortion, and its staunch orthodoxy of doctrine, unlike the weak compromises apparent within modern Anglicanism.

Muggeridge's *Death of Christendom* seemed an exaggerated attack against institutional religion, but now we can see how prophetic it was. Likewise, his broad sweep of the decadence of Western civilization in *Chronicles of Wasted Time* may prove more profound than any other survey of the twentieth century. Malcolm has had a profound effect upon our family, demonstrating that to be truthful, one needs to be courageous, humble, simple, and decidedly free from ambition. Egotism was for him, "the hiss of the cobra." Towards the end of our friendship, I asked him what further book would he have desired to write before he died. Unhesitatingly his reply was, *Against Consensus*. But he added, "Perhaps you will write it!" Since his favorite text as a modern Qoheleth was, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," all his life Malcolm was "against consensus." But once he learned to abide in Christ, he confessed: "All I can claim to have learnt from the years I have spent in this world is that the only happiness is love, which is attained by giving, not receiving." We most appreciate the world as a beautiful place when we become aware that we have another, heavenly destiny. We are here, then, to acclimatize ourselves to another, an eternal reality. Consensus with this fallen world has no future.

References

Muggeridge himself invited Ian Hunter to use all his available papers to write his biography, *Malcolm Muggeridge, A Life*, Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980.

1. John-Bright Holmes, *Like It Was: The Diaries of Malcolm Muggeridge*, London: Collins, 1981.

2. Muggeridge once estimated: "Over the last forty years I must have written, at a modest estimate, some 5,000 words a week, or, say, a quarter of a million words a year. In all, ten million written words, of which so very, very few, if any, may be considered as having more than a momentary value." *Muggeridge Through the Microphone*, 1969, quoted in Ian Hunter, edit. *The Very Best of Malcolm Muggeridge*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1998, p. 260.

3. Kitty Muggeridge (with Ruth Adam), *Beatrice Webb: A Life*, London: Collins, 1967.

4. Malcolm Muggeridge, *Picture Palace*, a novel written in 1934. Reprinted by Weidenhall and Nicolson, London, 1987, p. 9.

5. Malcolm Muggeridge, *Winter in Moscow*, London: Eyre and Spottiswode, 1934, p. 207.

6. This earlier, secular part of his life is well described in the biography of Richard Ingrams, *Muggeridge: A Life*, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995.

7. *New Statesman*, 1964, p. 38.

8. Malcolm Muggeridge, *Conversion*, London: Collins, 1988; reprinted in the U.S.A., as *Confessions of a Twentieth-Century Pilgrim*, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988.

9. From a Christian perspective this was esteemed his best book, according to Gregory Wolfe, *Malcolm Muggeridge, a Biography*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997, p. 379.

10. Malcolm Muggeridge, *The Green Stick: Chronicles of Wasted Time*, London: Fontana/Collins, 1975, vol. i, p. 15.

Dr. James M. Houston is retired Board of Governors' Professor of Spiritual Theology, Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia. In 1968 he worked with others to found Regent, an international graduate school with over 1,000 students annually and a world-class faculty which has included J.I. Packer, Eugene Peterson, and others. In 1976, Dr. Houston co-founded the C.S. Lewis Institute and serves as Senior Fellow.



He received his MA from the University of Edinburgh and M.A., B.Sc., and D.Phil. degrees from Oxford University.

Dr. Houston is the author of numerous books including *The Transforming Power of Prayer: Deepening Your Friendship With God*, *In Pursuit of Happiness: Finding Genuine Fulfillment in Life*, and *The Mentored Life: From Individualism to Personhood*. *Jim and his wife Rita make their home in Vancouver.*

© 2006 C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE
8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE
Discipleship of Heart and Mind

In the legacy of C.S. Lewis,
the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can
articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ
through personal and public life.