

Dedicatory Address

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Seeing Through The Eye: Muggeridge, the Prophet of the Media Age

*We are led to believe a Lie
When we see not through the Eye.*

Malcolm Muggeridge loved those two lines of William Blake's, and often quoted them. For him, they articulated the essential flaw of television: it did not see through the eye, but through the camera. And, for him, the camera could only reach the surface. He liked to feel that his life—for all its eccentricity, frivolity and stage-craft—was dedicated to seeing things with the eye, getting beneath the surface, exploring to the heart of the matter. That is the traditional function of the prophet, and it will be the thesis of this paper that that is exactly what Muggeridge was—a prophet for the media age, a prophet *of* the media age.

The historian Paul Johnson, reviewing the two recent biographies of Muggeridge, has this to say about him:

Malcolm Muggeridge was *sui generis*. There was no aspect of him—political commentator, humorist, sage, religious maniac, TV star, self-promoting all-purpose moralist, personal friend—which fitted into any known category.

One's tempted to say, with friends like that who needs enemies? But yet it is that very elusiveness that makes him both interesting and important. Few people have hit the heights Muggeridge did, or in so many spheres of achievement. He wrote one—but just one—superb book of history, *The Thirties*. He wrote one good novel, *Affairs of the Heart*, which no less a critic than Evelyn Waugh described as a 'clever and complete achievement.' John Betjeman was even more impressed: 'Muggeridge is a writer of stature . . . an artist in words, a lover of the human race and what is essential and sometimes forgotten, a man who knows how to be brief and interesting.' He was a brilliant if erratic journalist, a distinctive if not distinguished editor, an outstanding public speaker and debater and—for the British public his sole reason for fame—one of the most charismatic of television performers. The trouble was that Malcolm himself was never sure which of the seven or eight

careers open to him he wished to pursue, and in the event he did all of them well, some of them very well, but probably none of them as well as he might have done had he been willing to give it his total commitment.

Muggeridge's background would have suggested little of this. He grew up in the heart of suburban London. His father worked for a firm of shirt manufacturers in the City, where he eventually became company secretary, so the Muggeridge family was not poor. Indeed, the neighbours in Birdhurst Gardens, Sanderstead, were highly respectable. The trouble was that the Muggeridges were not. Father was elected to the Croydon Borough Council as a Labour member in 1911, and remained on the Council until the nineteen thirties. That was not bad enough—to have a nest of 'socialists' at number 17—but Mr. Muggeridge would erect a little platform in Croydon market on Saturday evenings and harangue the passers-by on the glories of socialism and the coming great revolution.

Young Malcolm drank it all in. His years at Cambridge University were academically undistinguished, but helped to polish his enthusiasm for the socialist cause. He got to know various luminaries of the left wing, including the formidable Webb family, and cultivated an admiration for the social engineering that was going on at that time in the Soviet Union under Stalin. Interestingly, his university years also saw his first encounter with Christianity, in a serious way, largely through an Anglo-Catholic priest, Alec Vidler, who was to remain a life-long friend. Indeed, as his biographer Richard Ingrams shrewdly observes, far from 'coming to Christianity in old age,' it had been a 'life-long obsession.'

Vidler's influence on young Muggeridge was great. He took the step of confirmation in the Anglican Church, and his student years ended with a spell in India working in a mission school. But the religious phase didn't last very long—the temptations of the flesh and problems over any kind of 'dogmatic' religious system saw to that.

The politics of his childhood and adolescence were not so readily set aside. It took a visit to Moscow to exorcise the appeal of Soviet-style socialism. He went there as a young reporter for the *Manchester Guardian*, full of eager anticipation: he was about to see the Promised Land. In the event, his disillusionment was total and life-long.

On his first day in Moscow he watched the crowds at Lenin's Tomb, and was seized with the idea—a prophetic insight, perhaps—that 'one day an enraged mob would tear him from his place and trample him underfoot.' Red Square was 'perfect,' but the sight of a starving peasant vomiting over a piece of sausage haunted him. Initially he countered these doubts—the problems were temporary but also necessary if the great Five Year Plan was to be carried out.

But the awful truth could not be denied. Not only were people literally starving, but the regime itself was cruel and brutal. A visit to the country away from Moscow confirmed reports he had heard of widespread starvation and ill-treatment of the peasant population. He wrote about it, in some despair, to his erstwhile mentor in things socialist, Beatrice Webb:

I want to explain that my feelings about Soviet Russia are not based in a balancing of achievement against failure, of profit and loss, but an overwhelming conviction that the Government and all it stands for, its crude philosophy (religion if you like) is evil and a denial of everything I care for in life...I'm more sure than I've ever been sure of anything in my life that this is bad and that it is based on the most evil and cruel elements in human nature.

Muggeridge came back from Russia with the first contemporary reports of the true state of things there, reports which caused consternation not only in Moscow but among many Western journalists who had been taken in by Soviet propaganda. Walter Duranty in the *New York Times* denied that there was famine in Russia and added: 'There is no actual starvation or death from starvation, but there is widespread mortality from diseases due to malnutrition.' Orwell's Big Brother couldn't have put it better!

The thirties, when Muggeridge struggled as a writer and journalist, were also years of intense personal turmoil. His marriage to Kitty, idyllic in many ways, was under constant strain because of his indulgent life-style. After another spell in India he returned to London to work for the *Evening Standard*, largely on its gossip column, to review books, and to try to write some of this own. It was not until the war years, in 1940, that he was to produce a literary work of real substance, and that was his historical portrait of the thirties. Here his blend of the sardonic and the wickedly observant finally achieved a distinctive style, one which was to become the hall-mark of Muggeridge's writings for the rest of his life.

Although the BBC was one day to provide him with national fame, *The Thirties* contained the kind of lampoon of life within the BBC that surfaced again and again in his later writings. He knew the inside of Broadcasting House as a regular contributor to radio talk programmes:

The BBC came to pass silently, invisibly, like a coral reef, cells briskly multiplying, until it was a vast structure, a conglomeration of studios, offices, cool passages along which many passed to and fro; a society with its Kings and Lords and commoners, its laws and dossiers and revenue and easily suppressed insurrection ... Circumstances shaped

it, making it an image, pure and undefiled, of the times. It was a mirror held up to nature ... Whatever was put in it must either take on its texture or be expelled...

This, it should be remembered, was written in the Golden Age of radio, when millions of people hung on every news bulletin—and thirty-five million (80 per cent of the adult population of the United Kingdom) would listen to a single comedy programme, ITMA. Muggeridge was never afraid to choose big targets! Nor had he finished with the BBC, by any means.

The big change in Muggeridge's career, at any rate so far as the public were concerned, was his arrival on the television screen. In 1952 he was appointed Editor of *Punch*, which was then a mildly satirical humorous weekly magazine, mostly read in dentists' waiting rooms. This was a strange transition for the deputy editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, then as now the very epitome of Fleet Street decorum. However, Muggeridge proved an inspired choice and gave the old magazine the injection of new ideas that it desperately needed. It also put its Editor in the public eye, which may be the reason that he was invited to take part as an interviewer in a new and prestigious current affairs programme being launched by the BBC. It was called *Panorama*, and, following a one-off experiment in 1953 became a regular fixture the following year, with Muggeridge as a resident interviewer. It is still going strong, by a long way the BBC's most durable programme of political analysis, forty-two years later. Indeed, on Monday it will again achieve world-wide fame when a full-length, uncensored interview with Princess Diana will blow the royal marriage scene back into the headlines and onto TV screens literally all over the world. As Muggeridge would have observed: 'Those who live by the media, perish by the media!'

Again Muggeridge seemed a strange choice for *Panorama*. He had no experience of television and professed quite a dislike for it. He didn't even own a TV set. And he had one of the oddest accents ever to decorate the British air-waves, a bizarre combination of Oxbridge and south London. Each word emerged from what seemed to be a tortuous genesis somewhere within his buccal cavity, to be ejected into the ether like a guided missile. Odd it certainly was, but it also proved a media god-send. Malcolm was instantly recognisable. His voice was easily mimicked. His elf-like features and piercing eyes were designed for television. He was the nearest thing to an instant success, and for those of us slumped in front of the set each night he became a familiar figure.

He also rapidly became a highly controversial one. A feature in *Punch* about the ageing Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, not only suggested that he was too old for the job and should retire but illustrated it with a cartoon depicting the great national hero as a tired, ponderous figure, jaw sagging and his eyes

vacant. Needless to say, there was public outrage. There was even greater outrage when Muggeridge turned his fire on the Royal family in a *New Statesman* article that was reprinted in the *Saturday Evening Post* to coincide with a royal visit to the USA. Headed 'Royal Soap Opera,' it ridiculed the kind of obsequious coverage that was given at the time to the Queen and her entourage. One has to say that fifty years later it sounds quite mild! But it didn't sound mild in 1957. Muggeridge was accused of treasonable behaviour: doubtless some would have sent him to the Tower! Several of his friends broke off their relationship with him. Fortunately he had just left *Punch*, whose proprietors might have found this incident a scandal too far.

But the Churchill and royal stories made Muggeridge a household name. He was the man who had had the nerve to criticise two of the greatest national icons—indeed, the two greatest ones. And his reputation, far from scaring off subjects for his television interviews, seemed to ensure that nobody refused. Among those he interviewed in *Panorama* were Eleanor Roosevelt, Svetlana Stalin, Elsa Maxwell, the playwright Brendan Behan, Billy Graham and, of course, Mother Teresa.

During the years at *Punch* he also constantly revealed the two motifs that were to run like continuous threads through his life. One was his scepticism about the very medium that had made him famous. He simply refused to take television seriously. The other was a fascination with Christianity, which dogged him even in his most dissolute years. They came together for a moment on the day when he interviewed Billy Graham for *Panorama*—in fact, Muggeridge's first on the programme. When Graham replied to one question by saying 'Only God could answer that one,' Muggeridge came back with: 'And we haven't got him in the studio (casting his eyes heavenwards)—or have we?'

The same paradox had been shown in an astonishing letter which Muggeridge had written to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Dr. Fisher had complained about a frivolous article in *Punch* which he felt had mocked the Communion services. Muggeridge replied as follows:

I am, alas, not myself a believing Christian. I wish I were. But one thing I can say with the utmost sincerity, and that is that I grow ever more convinced that the Christian gospel was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to the world; that it represents the nearest to ultimate truth that has ever been revealed to mankind; that our civilization was born of it, is irretrievably bound up with it and would almost certainly perish without it.

For a professed non-Christian, those were very strong convictions, and they show that Muggeridge the iconoclast, adulterer and heavy drinker was already something of an Augustine figure (an analogy he would have welcomed), praying, only half in jest, ‘Lord, make me holy, but not yet!’

Of course, as we all know the prayer was answered. Malcolm’s life-long interest in religion began to become something of an obsession. Through the second half of the sixties he pursued a highly individualistic pilgrimage, now drawing nearer, now drawing back. I think Ingrams catches rather well Muggeridge’s attitude towards the Christian faith in the late sixties: ‘Malcolm’s religious position by this time was that of a Christian who had no commitment to any particular Church. If he had any special leaning it was towards Catholicism, but he had little sympathy for any of the trappings (confession, the rosary, the intercession of Saints) . . . In his correspondence with Mother Teresa . . . Malcolm continued to harp on the imperfections of the Church . . . and the dangers of the ecumenical movement.’

Some of this paradox can be seen in his fascinating book *Jesus Rediscovered*, published in 1969. I remember reading it with some bewilderment at the time. It was good to find this public figure, so long the cynic of the screen, ‘rediscovering’ Jesus, and there was no doubt about the spell which the Son of Man held for him. But there was still the ‘drawing back’—a deep reluctance to see Christianity make truth claims, grave doubts over major areas of Christian belief like the divinity of Christ, and one passage of quite explicit rejection of the very idea of receiving the ‘body and blood’ of Christ in the Eucharist. Yet the pilgrimage had begun and it was real.

A number of factors were fueling that journey into faith. One of his sons was an evangelical Christian, and Malcolm admired his single-minded commitment. There was the influence of Mother Teresa, with whom he had made a series of epoch-making films which in 1971 became a memorable book, *Something Beautiful for God*. But probably as much as anything else there was the gradual realisation that our society was, of itself, totally bankrupt. Just as Muggeridge had rejected the Utopia of the Soviet system, so slowly he came to see that the capitalist system was equally corrupt and corrupting. Without the Christian faith which gave it meaning and values, Western society was drifting into a mindless hedonism.

And Muggeridge knew all about hedonism! He had sated his appetites at that particular well for many years. But as he turned—perhaps belatedly—from a life-style marked by sexual and alcoholic excess, his mind seemed to clear, the sharp eyes saw truths that had been misty and elusive hitherto. A new Muggeridge was being born—the prophet of the media age.

Typically, he identified the media as prime villains in what he saw as the down-grading of society's moral values. People at the BBC were shocked to find that the poacher they had known so well had turned into a thoroughly tiresome game-keeper. From his association with the 'Festival of Lights' in 1971—a public campaign to restore standards to public life and especially the media—to his support for the opponents of abortion, euthanasia and pornography he had quite dramatically changed sides. As one unkind broadcaster put it, 'Malcolm spent his life burning the candle at both ends, and now he's running round blowing everybody else's candle out.'

His criticism of television was trenchant, and all the more telling because it was a medium he knew so well. I remember sitting in the front row of All Souls Church, in the West End of London, right next to Broadcasting House, the headquarters of the BBC, to hear a series of lectures by Malcolm Muggeridge on 'Christ and the Media'— they were later published as a book under that title. Around me sat many of my senior colleagues at the BBC— programme controllers, managing directors, heads of production and so on. It was quite a painful experience as Malcolm shredded all we did and all we stood for through the flailing rotary blades of his eloquence. Knowing his audience as I did, I confess it was hard to see these earnest men and women as agents of the Evil Kingdom. I suspect Malcolm would have seen us more as dupes than rogues. Be that as it may, we all recognised many palpable hits. It was a *tour de force*.

The lectures had been organised and were chaired by John Stott, then the Rector of All Souls, and I took the opportunity later to remonstrate with him about what I considered to be Muggeridge's simplistic and immoderate outburst. His reply was illuminating. 'Malcolm is a prophet,' he said, 'and prophets are not moderate. It's their task to speak the word, not to calculate its consequences.' It changed my perception of Malcolm Muggeridge, I have to say—though I still had grave misgivings about his (as I then saw it) jaundiced view of the media and their role in British society. I felt that he was imitating the practice of the ancient world, and killing the messenger, when his real objection was to the message.

For Malcolm, by this time, television was nothing but a distorting mirror, a harlot who promised much and delivered little. Rather than succumb to her wiles we should 'disconnect our aerials.' We had lost our grip of reality, trapped in a massive and misleading Fun Factory, a Theatre of the Absurd. He went further, imagining a 'fourth temptation' of Christ, to use television to promote his message. Jesus would have rejected it, as he did the others, on the grounds that television deals with fantasy, and his message was about reality. In one moment of inspired prophetic insight, Malcolm envisaged a future world in which people no longer met each other, or talked to each other, but communicated solely through the television screen. And that was well before

the arrival of e-mail, and the whole notion of ‘surfing the internet,’ an idea which would certainly have merited his favourite adjective: *bizarre*.

In 1971 Muggeridge’s root and branch denunciation of television did seem a rather pessimistic judgment. Now, I am not so sure. Isn’t most television today throughout the western world marked by an obsession with trivia, game shows, formula ‘drama,’ soap operas—and gossip masquerading as news? The Bible tells us that the test of a prophet is very simple: do his words come true? Time and again, one has to say, the gloomiest forebodings of the Prophet of Robertsbridge have proved to be truly prophetic. Television can’t be ‘disinvented’: he knew that, of course. But—rather like alcohol—we might feel that if we had known before it was discovered what evils were hidden in that Pandora’s Box, then we would have left it well alone.

On the other hand, if we *had* disconnected our aerials, we would not have seen *Something Beautiful for God*, or Malcolm’s television series with Alec Vidler, ‘In the Steps of St. Paul.’ We would not today, on the BBC channels which he lambasted, have 17% of the entire adult population watching ‘Songs of Praise’ every week—Christian worship and testimony reaching nine million people every Sunday evening. Nor would we have had 25% of the population watching Jane Austen’s ‘Pride and Prejudice’ in the Autumn schedules. Not all television, either in Europe or the USA, is uniformly bad. I think Muggeridge knew, in his heart of hearts, that a medium is just that—a **means**, not an end. It is what we do with television, how we use it, whether it is our master or our servant, that determines whether it is good or evil. That’s why the prophetic voice of Muggeridge, preserved now in these important archives and available to scholars all over the world, must **not** be silenced. He will help us to see truth ‘through the eye.’ He will encourage us to make television a servant of the good, not an agent of the trivial. He will help us to bridle its excesses and use it in the cause of whatever is true, beautiful, praise-worthy and good.

And—one last thought—this collection also keeps for us the voice of a craftsman of the English language and a Christian voice which speaks with all the more splendour because it was born from the seed-bed of doubt, cynicism and self-indulgence. At about the time of his admission into the Roman Catholic Church, towards the end of November 1982, when he was 79, Muggeridge wrote this reflection on the onset of old age. It deserves to stand among the classic texts of Christian devotion:

I often wake up in the night and feel myself in some curious way, half in and half out of my body, so that I seem to be hovering between the battered old carcass that I can see between the sheets and seeing in the darkness and in the distance a glow in the sky, the lights of Augustine’s City of

God. In that condition, when it seems just a toss-up whether I return into my body to live out another day, or make off, there are two particular conclusions, two extraordinarily sharp impressions that come to me. The first is of the incredible beauty of our earth—its colours and shapes, its smells and its features; of the enchantment of human love and companionship, and of the blessed fulfillment provided by human work and human procreation. And the second, a certainty surpassing all words and thoughts, that as an infinitesimal particle of God's creation, I am a participant in his purposes, which are loving and not malign, creative and not destructive, orderly and not chaotic, universal and not particular. And in that certainty, a great peace and a great joy.

Thank you, Malcolm!