

Wolfe, Gregory. *Malcolm Muggeridge: A Biography*. Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2003. 490 pp. \$15.00 paperback.

Strictly speaking, Gregory Wolfe's biography of Muggeridge is not a new volume. It was first published in 1995 by Hodder & Stoughton in the United Kingdom and, two years later, by Eerdmans in the United States. At the time of its first publication I was living in England and was putting the finishing touches to my own first biography, a life of G.K. Chesterton, which was to be published by Hodder & Stoughton a year later. I recall that Wolfe's biography appeared at the same time that HarperCollins published another life of Muggeridge, by Richard Ingrams. The two volumes even had very similar titles. Wolfe's was entitled *Malcolm Muggeridge: A Biography*, whereas Ingrams' volume was called, more boldly, *Muggeridge: The Biography*. The boldness of the latter sprang from the fact that Ingrams was a well-known journalist and television celebrity, and a longstanding friend of Muggeridge, whereas Wolfe was a young and unknown debutant. Ingrams had a sufficient degree of *gravitas* to claim the right to have written *the* biography of his friend. A similar claim by the young *arriviste* would have sounded not only absurdly precocious but absolutely preposterous. It would seem, therefore, that this battle of competing biographies was a somewhat one-sided affair. Ingrams was cast in the role of Goliath, whereas Wolfe was David. Surely there could be only one winner, as indeed there was. In conformity with the tradition established by their archetypal forebears, David triumphed unexpectedly over Goliath.

Although both biographies were enjoyable and sympathetic, Ingrams' bore the mark of the tried and tested journalist whilst Wolfe's bore the stamp of the true and trusty scholar. Ingrams waxed eloquently and entertainingly whilst barely paying lip service to

scholarly standards of annotation and source citation; Wolfe wrote well, and with equal eloquence, without ever compromising the highest standards of scholarship. Ingrams was somewhat sketchy in his coverage of the full panorama of Muggeridge's multi-faceted life, providing good coverage of some periods but inadequately patchy coverage of others; Wolfe covered every period with detailed dexterity and wove them all together into a perfectly proportioned tapestry. It is, therefore, a real boon for twentieth century literary scholarship that ISI Books have resurrected Wolfe's wonderful work.

Wolfe sets the tone (if the obscure Irish pun can be forgiven!) in the very opening paragraph of chapter one.

In 1903, the year Malcolm Muggeridge was born, George Bernard Shaw published his play, *Man and Superman*. Malcolm's father, H.T. Muggeridge, would boast to his friends that he had published his own Superman in 1903 ... H.T.'s *bon mot* ... concealed a world of hopes and ambitions for his son. It foreshadowed nearly all of the conflicts and tensions that would be played out in Malcolm's life.

In these few lines Wolfe succeeds in setting the scene for the whole of the life he is about to present to the reader. He sets the scene not merely physically but metaphysically. As Wolfe informs us, Shaw was not only "the leading socialist intellectual of the time," he also "symbolized everything that H.T. fervently admired." Shaw was the hero of Muggeridge's father's generation. He was the prophet of the Nietzschean notion of the Superman. The young Muggeridge was born into a world that idolized the myth of "progress" and the perfectibility of mankind. Man, so the theory insisted, would outgrow the primitive superstitions of the past and would evolve into an advanced super-

intelligent being. Man would become superman. Muggeridge would spend the rest of his life unlearning these dogmas that dogged his childhood. Eventually, and progressively, he would see beyond the chimera of the Shavian “superman” and discover the reality of the essentially unchanging and everlasting “man” that predates and postdates the Nietzschean nonsense of his father’s generation. Eventually. And progressively. But it would take him a lifetime of soul searching and intellectual probing to do so. This book takes us on that exhilarating journey as we watch Muggeridge’s Dantean progress from the hell of man’s insurrection to the heaven of God’s resurrection. From Fabian socialist to Roman Catholic convert, and all stops in between, we see the travels and travails of a soul in search of its source.

Muggeridge’s journey, or perhaps we should say his pilgrimage, is also interesting for the people who accompanied him along the way. He was born in the same year as Evelyn Waugh and George Orwell, and a year before Graham Greene, and his relationship with these literary giants, his exact contemporaries, is one of the most illuminating and engrossing aspects of his life. There is also a wonderful, if somewhat voyeuristic, account of Muggeridge’s encounter with the aging Winston Churchill and his sudden vision of Churchill as Shakespeare’s King Lear, a pathetic figure, “imprisoned in the flesh, in old age, longing for a renewal of the disease of life, all passion unspent” (263).

I note, as a postscript, upon perusing my 1984 edition of *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*, that there is no entry for Muggeridge. It skips from Robert Mugabe to Ladowick Muggleton. The former, as the butcher and tyrant of Zimbabwe needs no introduction, but who on earth is the latter? know, now, of course, because I have the

dictionary open in front of me, but why, I wonder, does the obscure founder of an obscure seventeenth century Puritan sect called the Muggletonians take precedence over a writer as important as Malcolm Muggeridge? Why indeed? I note upon further perusal that Muggeridge's aforementioned contemporaries – Greene, Orwell and Waugh – all merit reasonably sized entries in the selfsame dictionary. Perhaps this is fair enough. Perhaps it is true that Muggeridge has not bequeathed to posterity literary classics of the caliber of *Brighton Rock*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Brideshead Revisited*. His legacy is, however, of a different sort. Aside from his works of real literary merit, of which there are several, he was a pioneer of quality television in the days of the medium's infancy, and, more important, he was, and remains, a towering figure as a fearless dissident against the decadence of his age and ours. As a prophet his reputation stands secure. He is a modern-day Jeremiah, or, perhaps, England's answer to Solzhenitsyn. Either way his reputation merits resurrection.

As a writer who has specialized in writing biographies of literary converts to Catholicism I would have relished the challenge of writing a life of Malcolm Muggeridge. It is, however, too late. The challenge has already been met. The definitive biography has already been written. Indeed, my only complaint is that Gregory Wolfe's book has the wrong title. It is not 'a biography' it is *the* biography of Malcolm Muggeridge.

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