

He thought he found it in the end. In 1982, to the great satisfaction of Mother Teresa, he was accepted into the Catholic Church—with, he said, “a sense of responding to a bell that had long been ringing, of taking a place at a table that had long been vacant”.

Some sceptics were unmoved by his baptism. At the service a coach-load of retarded children kept up an accompaniment of obscure noise. Muggeridge thought it beautiful. Critics thought it a stunt. Graham Greene wrote: “I hope you make a better Catholic than I have done.”

Muggeridge had already declared:

I should certainly have failed in every respect to be a worthy follower of Jesus, outdoing Peter in denying him, Thomas in doubting him, and perhaps even Judas in betraying him.

He added: “I might just have been up to doing what Simon did” in shouldering the Cross on the Via Dolorosa.

I can only add that his remark to me that afternoon in Sussex—“Christendom is dead, but Christ lives”—impressed me as authentic. Only clowns and mystics, we are told, speak the truth. Which was Muggeridge? Wolfe says he was both.

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Royal Soap Opera

By Malcolm Muggeridge

[ED: This controversial article was published nearly fifty years ago in The New Statesman and Nation on 22nd October 1955. With the marriage in April 2005 of HRH Prince Charles to divorcee Camilla Parker-Bowles it is, perhaps, an appropriate time to give the issues Muggeridge raised a fresh airing. At that time, Princess Margaret, the Queen’s younger sister wanted to marry a divorcee, Group Captain Peter Townsend. In the event, she was forced to choose between marriage and remaining in the line of succession to the throne. She chose the latter and in due course married society photographer Anthony Armstrong Jones – who became Lord Snowdon. The marriage was ultimately unsuccessful and ended in divorce.]

There probably are quite a lot of people – more than might be supposed – who, like myself, feel that another newspaper photograph of a member of the royal family will be more than they can bear. Even Princess Anne, a doubtless estimable child, becomes abhorrent by constant repetition. Already she has that curious characteristic gesture of limply holding up her hand to acknowledge applause. The Queen Mother, the Duke of Edinburgh, Nanny Lightbody,

Group Captain Townsend – the whole show is utterly out of hand, and there is much graver danger than might superficially appear that a strong reaction against it might be produced.

This attitude of adulatory curiosity towards the royal family is, of course, something quite new. *Punch* in the nineteenth century made full use, for instance, of the rich vein of satirical material provided by the Royal Dukes, and in our own time Max Beerbohm found the reigning monarch a natural subject, along with all the eminent, for caricature. All this was very healthy. It presupposed a respect for the institution of monarchy, and a sense that incumbents were, like us all, mortal men and women. Let us beware lest, in adulating the incumbents, in insulating them from the normal hazards of public life, we jeopardise the institution. It is, of course, true that the present royal family are much more respectable than most of their Hanoverian ancestors, and therefore lend themselves less to satire. But to put them above laughter, above criticism, above the workaday world, is, ultimately, to dehumanise them and risk the monarchy dying of acute anaemia.

It may be argued that it is the general public who require this adulation of the royal family, and that the newspapers, magazines and the B.B.C., in catering for it, are merely meeting the public’s requirement in this, as they do in any other field. Undoubtedly it is true that a picture in colour of the Queen or Princess Margaret

is a circulation-builder. Equally undoubtedly it is true that the unspeakable Crawfie, and all the other dredgers up of unconsidered trifles in the lives of members of the royal family, down to and including Godfrey Winn, provide popular features. It may even be true (though there is no way of proving this) that those portentous, unctuous B.B.C. announcements, with "the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh" rolled off the tongue like a toastmaster at a particularly awesome Guildhall banquet—that even these are liked by listeners. Personally, I came to feel, during the recent royal tour, that it was better to sacrifice the news than endure them.

The fact remains that tedious adulation of the royal family is bad for them, for the public, and ultimately for the monarchical institution itself. Is there anything that can be done to check it? One step would be for the royal family to provide themselves with an efficient public relations set-up in place of the rather ludicrous courtiers who now function as such. This would enable information and photographs to be channelled out in a controlled, instead of haphazard, manner. It would also, if astutely conducted, check some of the worst abuses in the way of invasion of privacy and sheer impertinence. An experienced public relations operator knows how to distribute and withhold favours in such a manner as to maintain some measure of control over those with whom he deals. Also, he knows how to advise those on whose behalf he acts. When, for instance, this Townsend business first started it would have been his duty to convince the royal family that it was essential to make some sort of statement at once, frankly explaining the situation. Otherwise, he would have urged, there was bound to be an orgy of vulgar and sentimental speculation which could not but, in the long run, damage the whole standing and status of everyone concerned. After all, if we are to accept that the Crown is useful constitutionally even though deprived of all real power, it must be maintained with some dignity. A Lord Chancellor who was constantly providing material for the commoner sort of magazine and newspaper feature would soon be considered unsuitable for his high office. Likewise, a Speaker of the House of Commons or a Lord Chamberlain. How much more, then, is this true of the royal family?

Of course it is not their fault, though I suspect that they develop a taste for the publicity, which, in theory, they find so repugnant. This is merely human. It applies in one form or another to everyone. Even a tiny television notoriety is liable to please, or at any rate excite, when all one's conscious being finds it vulgar and odious. At the same time, the royal family ought to be properly advised on how to prevent themselves and their lives from becoming a sort of royal soap opera. They need far more of such advice, and far less of Cecil Beaton and Baron.

Nothing is more difficult than to maintain the prestige of an institution which is accorded the respect and accoutrements of power without the reality. The tendency for such an institution to peter out in pure fantasy is very great. It is like the king in chess. If he ventures into the middle of the board the game is lost. He has to be kept in the background and ringed round with pieces more powerful than himself. Indeed, in a sense it could be said that popularity is fatal to monarchy. The Russian monarchy was never so popular, or treated to such scenes of insensate adulation as in 1914; and even for Farouk's wedding the streets of Cairo were crammed with cheering Egyptians. Yet when, a few years later, the Tsar and his family were cruelly shot down in a cellar no one seemed to care much, and most, if not all, eyes were dry in Egypt when Farouk made off. Extremes of public emotion are always socially dangerous. Cromwell remarked to Fairfax when they were riding through cheering crowds that the same people would have turned out as eagerly to see him hanged. It was the very fatuity of adulation and sycophancy to which King Edward VIII, as Prince of Wales, was subjected which made the reaction so much the greater when the soap opera took, from the point of view of those set in authority over us, an ugly turn. The whole question of the King's relations with Mrs. Simpson, that is to say, might have been handled sensibly if sense had prevailed before. You cannot, however, graft a Henry James denouement onto an Elinor Glyn novel.

The probability is, I suppose, that the monarchy has become a kind of *ersatz* religion. Chesterton once remarked that when people cease to believe in God, they do not then believe in nothing, but in anything. Among other solaces, like Johnnie Ray and dreams of winning a football pool and Lollobrigida, is royalty. The people one sees staring through the railings of Buckingham Palace even when the Queen is not in residence are like forlorn worshippers at one of those shrines, whether Christian or Hindu or Buddhist, which depend on some obviously bogus miraculous happening. As a religion, monarchy has always been a failure; the god-king invariably gets eaten. Men can only remain sane by esteeming what is mortal for its mortality. I dare say what really drove the Gadarene swine mad was the thought that Group Captain Townsend was at the bottom of the cliff.

The normal middle-class attitude is to blame the press, and, heaven knows, it has excelled itself in vulgarity and sentimentality in dealing with the Townsend story. Yet the provocation has been very great. Has even the Foreign Office ever devised a more inept communiqué than the one about no statement of Princess Margaret's future being contemplated at present? If the intention had been to give the story another shot in the arm no more effective device could have been adopted. I believe myself that the little daughter of Princess Margaret's week-end host who told reporters that the Princess and the Group Captain had

looked at all the Sunday papers and just loved them, was speaking the truth. This sort of thing is expected of Rita Hayworth, but the application of film-star techniques to representatives of a monarchical institution is liable to have, in the long run, disastrous consequences. The film-star soon passes into oblivion. She has her moment and then it is all over. And even her moment depends on being able to do superlatively well whatever the public expects of her. Members of the royal family are in an entirely different situation. Their role is to symbolise the unity of a nation; to provide an element of continuity in a necessarily changing society. This is history, not the Archers, and their affairs ought to be treated as such.

If there were a republican party, as in Joseph Chamberlain's time, it might get quite a few recruits. A lot of the old arguments which pointed to the great advantages of a monarchical over an elective presidential system no longer apply. The simple fact is that the United States' Presidency today is a far more dignified institution than the British monarchy. It is accepted that the President must be "put over" by all the vast and diverse apparatus of mass communications. If the result

lacks elegance, at least the impression created is of efficiency and forethought. Just imagine if Princess Margaret and Group Captain Townsend, instead of being trailed about the country (which the procedure imposed on them actually encouraged, just as T.E. Lawrence's avoidance of publicity necessarily brought reporters scurrying after him) and thereby, incidentally, occupying a great many police sorely needed elsewhere, had called a press conference and explained simply and in their own words just how matters stood. What a relief for us all! What a saving of acres of newsprint! The objection, no doubt, would be that such a press conference would be undignified. In fact, it wouldn't be nearly as undignified as what has now happened. The royal family and their advisers have really got to make up their minds – do they want to be part of the mystique of the century of the common man or to be an institutional monarchy; to ride, as it were, in a glass coach or on bicycles; to provide the tabloids with a running serial or to live simply and unaffectedly among their subjects like the Dutch and Scandinavian royal families. What they cannot do is to have it both ways.

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Muddling into Mugg - An American's Encounter

By Gord Wilson

I came across Malcolm Muggeridge willy nilly. He wasn't as well known in America as in Britain—or if he was, I wasn't among the knowing. But his name nevertheless popped up everywhere. Maybe it was a bit on David Frost or Steve Allen, or I caught him on *That Was the Week That Was*, shows I barely remember, but still associate with him. Also William F. Buckley's *Firing Line* show.

Muggers was one of the first to champion Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and after reading *The Gulag Archipelago*, I sent in for the show's transcript. In the library I came upon *The Most of Malcolm Muggeridge*, an American anthology similar to *Tread Softly for You Tread on My Jokes*, but even funnier, and devoured lines like this one, from "An Evening with the Bodgies and Widgies in Melbourne," which recalls Hunter Thompson's writing about Hell's Angels: "The tang of adolescent sex was in the air, or rather of carnal knowledge—perhaps of carnal ignorance, perhaps just hysteria. Who knows?" The shrapnel of the sexual revolution. I read the funniest bits over and over, especially "Church of Christ, Economist," and "The Life and Lies of Frank Harris," captivated by the suavity, wit and style. By great good fortune I was able to view *The Third Testament* television programmes while at university, and *Jesus: Rediscovered* made it into the local bookstore. *Jesus: The Man Who Lives*, in the original

hardback with full-color art plates, appeared one winter as the gift book of the season.

But the showstopper was MM's brilliant autobiography, *Chronicles of Wasted Time*. When *The Green Stick* appeared, I savored the hardback. *The Infernal Grove* was even better, and I remember hoping my number would not be up before I could finish it. When I later auditioned for a part in a play, I chose for my reading a monologue from *The Infernal Grove*, "a play in search of a part."

Why did these books exercise such a spell, and why such an identification? Because, like everyone who comes in contact with him, I felt that he was "Our Mugg," our unyielding advocate in this comedy of errors, and the only one who knew what was going on. While visiting London, I collected what British editions I could find, mostly in Fontana paperbacks. I had a stack of these on the seat during the plane ride back, and had settled in with *The Thirties*. My knowledge of British history was scant, and I recognized few of the names, but the writing was nevertheless so funny I could not suppress my merriment. This drew angry looks from some of the passengers, until they saw what I was reading. "Oh, Malcolm Muggeridge!" one lady exclaimed, and I invited her to select from my bounty. The plane had apparently been chartered by Muggeridge fans, for soon I had dealt out my stack, and we all snuggled in with a good read for the duration.