HESKETH PEARSON

Hesketh Pearson was a prolific author. His list shows that his work was published from 1921 until after the end of his life:

Modern men and mummers (1921)
A Persian critic (1923)
The whispering gallery: leaves from a diplomat's diary (1926)
Iron rations (1928)
Dr Darwin (1930)
Ventilations: being biographical asides (1930)
The fool of love. a life of William Hazlitt (1934)
Common misquotations (1934) editor
The Smith of Smiths, being the life, wit and humour of Sydney Smith (1935)
Gilbert and Sullivan: a biography (1935)
Labby: the life and character of Henry Labouchere (1935)
The Swan of Lichfield: being a selection from the correspondence of Anna Seward (editor, 1936)
Tom Paine. Friend of mankind: a biography (1937)
Thinking it over (1938)
Skye high: the record of a tour through Scotland in the wake of Samuel Johnson and James Boswell (with Hugh Kingsmill, 1938)
The hero of Delhi (1939)
This blessed plot (with Hugh Kingsmill, 1942)
Bernard Shaw: his life and personality (1942)
Conan Doyle: his life and art (1943)
Oscar Wilde, his life and wit (1946)
Talking of Dick Whittington (with Hugh Kingsmill, 1947)
A life of Shakespeare: with an anthology of Shakespeare's poetry (1949)
Dickens, his character, comedy, and career (1949)
G.B.S: a postscript (1950)
The last actor managers (1950)
Essays of Oscar Wilde (editor, 1950)
A writ for libel (play, with Colin Hurry, 1950)
About Kingsmill (with Malcolm Muggeridge, 1951)
Dizzy; the life and personality of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield (1951)
The man Whistler (1952)
Sir Walter Scott: his life and personality (1954)
Beerbohm Tree: his life & laughter (1956)
Gilbert: his life and strife (1957)
Johnson and Boswell: the story of their lives (1958)
Charles II: his life and likeness (1958)
The Pilgrim daughters (1961)
Lives of the wits (1962)
Henry of Navarre (1963)
Hesketh Pearson, by himself (1965)
Extraordinary people (1965)

Pearson was born in rural Worcestershire in 1887, to a middle-class family that soon moved to Bedford. It was a well-connected family claiming descent from Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of the more famous Charles, and Pearson's great-great-uncle was Sir Francis Galton, the champion of eugenics and, rather longer-lasting, the perfecter of fingerprint identification.

Hesketh Pearson
Ownership of image unknown.

After Cambridge and various failures in the commercial world, by 1911 he was in London under the erratic patronage of Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree and describing himself in the census as an actor. In 1912 he married another actor, Gladys Bardili (stage name Gladys Gardner) and they were together until her death in 1951 despite his persistent and often successful pursuit of other women. (Very shortly after Gladys died he rather quickly married their neighbour Joyce Ryder, who was to outlive him). One child was born to his first marriage, in 1913: Henry, who would join the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War and would die in hospital in August 1938 from wounds received at the battle of the Ebro.

At the beginning of the First World War Pearson joined up but was diagnosed as suffering from tuberculosis and discharged; a second attempt in the following year had the same result. He continued acting until 1916, when he managed to join the Army Service Corps as a Private (Driver). In 1917, with influential patronage from a royal, he was commissioned and sent to Mesopotamia where he suffered repeated illnesses and was sent to find a roadworthy route from there through Iran to the Caspian Sea in preparation for the expedition to Baku. His final rank was Captain, and he was awarded the Military Cross which, true to form, he always refused to mention, even in his memoirs. After his third discharge he returned to acting. His brother Jack was a founder and sub-editor of the *Wipers Times*. Jack also won the MC but reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

Pearson's early literary career seemed unremarkable. During the war he had contributed to British newspapers from the Mespot front and in the 1920s he wrote two books about his experiences but was brought near to bankruptcy by his *Modern men and mummers*, which described in humorous but often negative terms most of the men whom he knew or with whom he had worked. He was saved by payments by Horatio Bottomley of all people. (After all, Pearson championed Frank Harris, so Bottomley was hardly anything worse.)

Then, in 1926/27, notoriety found him. He had convinced Allen Lane of The Bodley Head (later to be the founder of Penguin Books) that his hoax *The whispering gallery* was composed of entries from a diary of a senior diplomat. Later Pearson claimed that this was Sir Rennell Rodd, a Foreign Office grandee and until shortly before then the ambassador to Italy from 1908 to 1919, including the whole of the First World War; he had published his own memoirs in three volumes between 1922 and 1925. On the basis of this story Pearson obtained a cheque of £250 – or £225; accounts vary – in advance of royalties, which he returned before charges were laid against him. On publication the *Daily Mail* (and then others) exposed him. In the case of the *Mail* it was because its founder Lord Northcliffe (by then dead, but his brother Lord Rothermere owned the paper) came badly out of the book.

The others simply could not believe that a senior diplomat would hold the views attributed to him or, even more so, write in the way that it was claimed.

Not unnaturally, Lane was annoyed; and the fact that money had changed hands exposed Pearson to a charge of obtaining it by false pretences. He was so charged in November 1926 and came up for trial in the following January, having rejected all appeals from family and friends to plead guilty. The trial was very brief but well-serviced: the prosecutor was Sir Henry Curtis-Bennett and the defence barrister Sir Patrick Hastings, two of the best-known King's Counsel in England. Even Curtis-Bennett, however, could not prove an intent to deceive, though he put both Rodd and Lane into the witness box. Pearson's defence was that the book was an obvious hoax and that he had returned the money before any threat of prosecution had been made. The jury acquitted him, much to the annoyance not only of Rodd but also of *The Times* where the verdict prompted a very negative editorial, and Rodd's letter of complaint appeared on the same day.

Pearson suffered in the short run, for publishers were wary of him, not least because his public reputation might have deterred purchasers of any future work, and he returned to the stage where his stock had risen from its previous low. Very shortly, however, he abandoned acting to concentrate on writing, and in the longer run his notoriety proved short-lived. Penguin under Allen Lane published several of his later books. Pearson seemed to know everyone in the literary world, from Shaw, Belloc and Chesterton to the infamous Frank Harris, whom he championed if only to be provocative. He was a particular friend of Hugh Kingsmill.

Pearson's connection with Sussex was due to the danger of living in London during the Second World War. To escape the blitz he moved to Woods Place at Whatlington in 1941, the next house along an unmade lane from where Malcolm Muggeridge was already established but absent on war duty, and like him he became one of the most devoted customers of The Royal Oak there as well as of several other pubs. Pearson – another serial adulterer – had an affair with Kitty Muggeridge while Muggeridge was in America. It was admitted by Kitty later, but it didn't bring the men's friendship and collaboration to an end. He and Gladys moved back to London in 1945.

As with Muggeridge it took time for Pearson to develop a style and a theme, and with Pearson it was serious biography, beginning with his ancestor Erasmus Darwin. Gladys helped with the research for her husband's books but by 1950 it was clear that she was no longer in a condition to do so and Pearson was on his own. His books still sell.

After Pearson's death Muggeridge wrote of his approach to life as being similar to that of his subject, the Rev Sydney Smith – the 'Smith of Smiths':

> I cannot believe that Smith could have hoped for a more sympathetic biographer, or Hesketh for a more sympathetic subject for a biography. They suited one another perfectly, and I trust that by this time they have met and compared notes in the celestial precincts reserved for Anglicans who in the days of their mortality were given to laying up treasure on earth, and regarding the Ten Commandments as like an examination paper, with seven only to be attempted.

George Kiloh

Sources
Ian Hunter: *Nothing to repent*
Richard Ingrams: *Muggeridge*
The Times, various 1926-27, and obituary 10 April 1964
Muggeridge's introduction to *The Smith of Smiths* (Folio edition, 1977)

See also Malcolm Muggeridge.