

MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE



Muggeridge (1903-90) was a journalist, author, broadcaster and campaigner whose face and manner of speaking were instantly recognisable across Britain. His connection with the Battle area was that he lived at the Mill House at Whatlington for some twenty years (thereafter moving to Park Cottage outside Robertsbridge) and is buried in the churchyard there. While in Sussex he had close professional relationships with the writers Hugh Kingsmill (at Hastings) and Hesketh Pearson, who was also for a time at Whatlington.

Muggeridge's journey through life was not unproblematic. He was a son of a man who later became a Labour MP and a working-class Sheffield woman. In his youth he was an admirer of Stalin's Russia, but that fell away with his personal knowledge of the famine of 1932, let alone of the later political trials; and he died as a vigorous and conservative Roman Catholic. He was of course not the only one to make this particular journey; perhaps the need for a faith of some kind is fundamental to those travelling it even if, in Muggeridge's case, he spent most of his life as a professed agnostic. In fact in the early thirties there was considerable support for the Soviet Union among the British intelligentsia, including for example Bernard Shaw and Sidney and Beatrice Webb (and Muggeridge's wife Kitty was a niece both of Beatrice Webb and Stafford Cripps). While this support drained away from most people, and very quickly from Muggeridge, the rise of fascism and the breakdown of capitalism in 1929-32 gave it continued popularity up to and including the time of the Second World War.



After Cambridge, where he was an adherent of Anglo-Catholicism, he was at first a teacher in India, Britain and Egypt (where at the University of Cairo he succeeded Robert Graves in post), then a journalist on the *Manchester Guardian* – on the recommendation of Arthur Ransome, who had

Image from: <http://matters-phonetic.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/malcolm-muggeridge-interviewing-john.html>

(significantly or otherwise) married Trotsky's secretary. It was for the *MG* that he went to Moscow in 1932, reporting back on the terrible scenes of the Ukrainian famine, reports of which were, however, incompletely published. There was great reluctance on the liberal left to give offence to Stalin's Russia, particularly when Shaw and others were singing its praises. Many years later an independent Ukraine made him the posthumous award of the Order of Freedom in gratitude for his attempts to bring the Moscow-directed famine to general notice. The argument added to the tension already existing between Muggeridge and the new editor of the *MG*, and he left the paper. Thereafter he was mainly freelance.

Muggeridge was a compulsive writer, and the titles of his books show his political and spiritual journey:

Three flats: a play in three acts (1931)
Winter in Moscow (1934)
Picture palace (1934, 1987)
The earnest atheist. a study of Samuel Butler (1936)
The Thirties, 1930–1940 (1940, 1989)
Affairs of the heart (1949)
About Kingsmill (with Hesketh Pearson, 1951)
Tread softly for you tread on my jokes (1966)
Jesus rediscovered (1969)
Something beautiful for God (1971)
Paul, envoy extraordinary (1972) with Alec Vidler
Chronicles of wasted time: an autobiography (1972, 2006)
Jesus: the man who lives (1975)
A third testament: a modern pilgrim explores the spiritual wanderings of Augustine, Blake, Pascal, Tolstoy, Bonhoeffer, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky (1976, 2002)
Christ and the media (1977)
In a valley of this restless mind (1978)
Things past (1979)
The end of Christendom (1980)
Like it was: The diaries of Malcolm Muggeridge (1981)
Conversion: the spiritual journey of a twentieth century pilgrim (1988, 2005)
Chronicles of wasted time: volumes I & II including 'The right eye' (2006)

This complicated man was of course far more than a scribbler. Thoroughly disillusioned with British politics and with its unreadiness for war, he joined up in 1939, by which time he had perfected the style that he displayed for the rest of his life: *The Thirties* is direct, witty, cynical and well-informed. In the war he served in intelligence, serving first in Mozambique, which as a Portuguese colony was a neutral area with diplomatic representation from all the warring powers. He was a success, and was later moved to the USA and Algeria and then, at the liberation, to Paris. He was an early investigator of the case against P G Wodehouse, who as a British civilian caught in France by the Axis invasion had been imprisoned and later subjected to house arrest; he then made five light-hearted broadcasts to Britain on German radio. Muggeridge and Wodehouse became friends rather than enemies as a result of this encounter. Wodehouse wrote in a letter: "I'm so glad that you like Malcolm Muggeridge. Words can't tell what a friend he has been to us." He ended the war as a Major, with the French Croix de Guerre.

He returned to journalism, becoming a deputy editor of *The Daily Telegraph* and edged into broadcasting at a time when the BBC – then the only broadcasting organisation – was still beset by deference to the great and the good and something even more than that to the royal family. His work there was controversial but it led the way to a much more open and popular kind of interviewing. His wit and humour must have helped him when editor of *Punch* in the fifties (and as a guest editor of *Private Eye* in the sixties) and he was a sharp interviewer and commentator. From the sixties, though, he fell out with modern Britain, becoming ever more strident in his denunciation of pop culture and overt sexuality, drug use, contraception and all the behavioural characteristics that we popularly associate with that decade.

His BBC interview with the then unknown Mother Teresa in 1967 brought her to wide notice in the West and his regard for her and her faith may have been a factor in his

and Kitty's decision in 1982 to convert to Roman Catholicism. Indeed, apart from memoirs from 1967 all his works were associated with his Christian beliefs.

It is no surprise that he took to giving sermons:

Ultimate concern: 'Am I a Christian?' (1967)

Living water (1968)

Another king (1968)

Still I believe: nine talks broadcast during Lent and Holy Week (1969)

Light in our darkness (1969)

Fundamental questions: what is life about? (1970)

America needs a Punch, *Esquire* (April 1958)

He joined enthusiastically in campaigns against what he saw as a civilisation losing its values and moving towards dissolution, primarily sexual dissolution. He was far from alone in this: the names of his co-warriors Lord Longford and Mary Whitehouse spring to mind. By 1979, when he attacked Monty Python's *Life of Brian* in a television discussion with its creators without actually having seen the film, his severance from mass, let alone minority, popular culture was complete. He continued to write, though less prolifically, and was clearly in retirement. Muggeridge declared that he had always felt like a stranger in a strange world, and perhaps it was this sense of detachment that made him unique among late-century commentators. He wrote that he had never been able to take seriously any form of authority, though presumably he did so before embracing the authority of Pope John Paul II. He was a wonderful writer: informed, thoughtful, witty – and certainly provocative. On the other side of the coin he has recently been outed as an enthusiastic adulterer, and as a serial groper of women during his time at the BBC. Unfortunately, as we know, he was far from alone in this.

Age took its toll of him, and towards the end he had to live in care homes, at Loose Farm in Battle and then in Bexhill. He died at home at Robertsbridge in 1990.

Kitty, herself a remarkable character and not beyond having affairs herself, died in Canada in 1994 and is buried with her husband at Whatlington. She had five children with him.

George Kiloh

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Sources

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See also Hesketh Pearson