

Muggeridge: "A witty, 100-proof Christian"

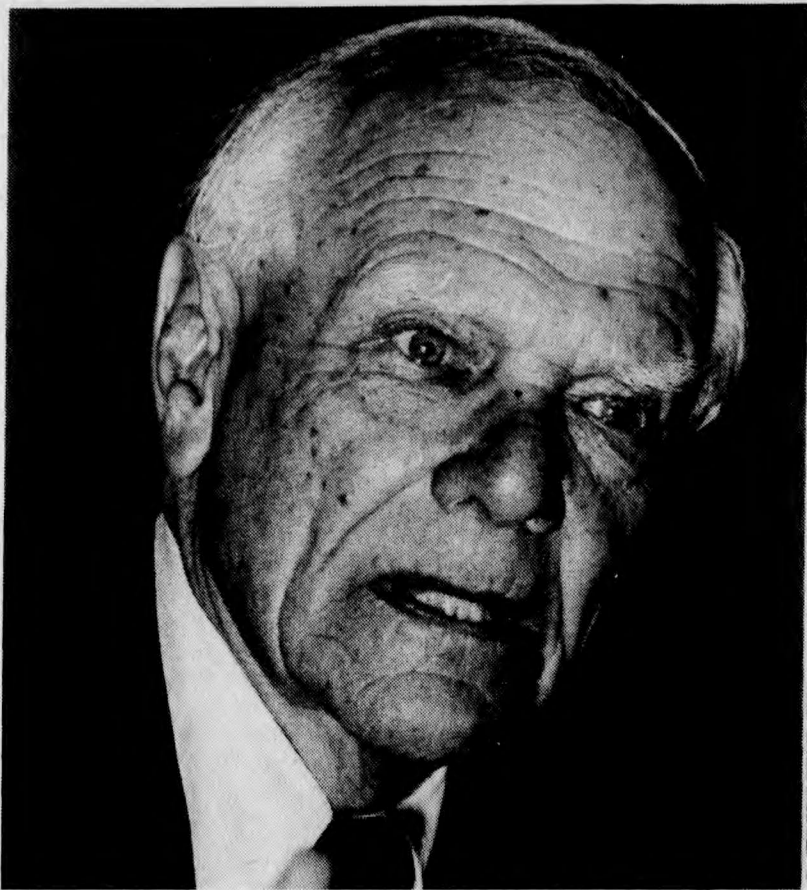
By Paul Stuart

"The media are so made they cannot convey what is real," said British journalist and author Malcolm Muggeridge in Burton Auditorium last week, adding that if he had been in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion, "I would have been hanging around Herod's palace trying to sign up Salome for her exclusive memoirs — a live issue in Canada at the moment."

Muggeridge, three-quarters of a century old, former star of the British press and creator of the *Third Testament* television series on Christian thinkers, was displaying the wit he used to counterpoint the message he delivered at Burton; a message which appears to be making a comeback these days: Christianity, 100 proof.

Muggeridge talked mostly about faith, — "the knowledge transcending knowing" — and his own journey toward it. His story, of a socialist upbringing, a disillusioning stay in Moscow in the early '30s, and a subsequent, passionate turn to religion has frequently been told in interviews and, most completely, in his powerful autobiography, *Chronicles of Wasted Time*.

The conclusions Muggeridge was to draw, led him to the opposite pole from his childhood beliefs. He had been taught by his father that "good men must get power and through power make a better world — that this was essentially the purpose of our existence." After Moscow, Muggeridge decided that power, "even when exercised in the name of religion or making men better, inevitably produces the opposite effect." And because of "the absolute buffoonery" of the Western intellectuals who went to Moscow and fawned on the dictatorship (they were derisively labelled "radical tourists" by the exiled Trotsky), he lost faith in the unaided human intellect "as a guide through the experience of this life."



British author Malcolm Muggeridge at York.

This attitude set him apart from many members of the Burton crowd, who whatever their attitude towards religion, seemed to believe in the possibility of social progress and in rationality as a tool to be used in attaining it. Time and again the audience went back to the questions: What about the poor? What about the oppressed?

"Never for one second has power produced good," came Muggeridge's reply, "it can only make evil less."

For Muggeridge, the whole world is a parable which reinforces his religious beliefs. He told the crowd that when Thalidomide, the drug responsible for the birth of thousands of deformed babies in the early 60s, was being developed its first name was *Soma*, the name of the all-purpose happy pill in Huxley's *Brave New World*. To Muggeridge, this was a parable in

which God asked humanity: "Did you really think you could make your world free of suffering?"

Though Muggeridge, out of humility, probably would not distinguish himself from run of the mill, tunnel-vision evangelicals, he stands out from them sharply in two ways: the intellectual power with which he puts forth his views and his concept of eternity as a "projection of time," a timeless realm which can be glimpsed now, rather than a prolonged hereafter stretching out for centuries after death.

Here he is at his best, as he is when he questions "...this consensus, the mysterious orthodoxy, a materialistic humanism which dominates today's world."

(A large dose of which was ladled out for Einstein's anniversary: In the beginning was the Hydrogen Dust Cloud, which begat the Big Bang, which through a series of flukes begat you and I and everything. And there is no reason to believe that there is anything about being alive which Father Dust Cloud can't explain.)

But Muggeridge has his weaknesses. This seemed most apparent when he was asked the time-honoured question: How could a loving God permit the horrors of history? Though he conceded that there is "no final

answer," his comparison of the world to Shakespeare's *King Lear* — a drama which needs evil to keep the play moving along — was not convincing. If all the victims were like Lear and able to learn from their experience, the argument might have some force; but what about all the infants born only to suffer and die?

He may not have had the answer, but the process of questioning was fascinating. All the more so because Muggeridge, despite the bashfulness he radiated while being introduced on stage, is still something of an entertainer (particularly off-stage); an ebullient, cheerful extrovert, ever ready with a one-liner.

As he was leaving York I asked him why he makes such nasty comments about T.S. Eliot, a religious poet who said a lot of things that sound just like St. Mugg. He conceded that he had been too hard on Eliot and said it was because when he knew the poet in London "there was always something lugubrious about him."

"I'm the sort who likes humour in everything, even in the 10 commandments. Don't know where you'd find it there.... probably in the seventh."

Gary Hershorn



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