

HILAIRE BELLOC¹

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IT is not yet four years since Mr Belloc died. He left a vast and varied *opus*; a collection of friends almost as diverse as his books; a legend; and an enormous quantity of diaries and papers. It is astonishing that in so short a time Mr Speaight should have been able to work through so many sources of information, assess their relevance, extract what was of value, bring the legend into focus in the man, and write this admirable study, objective, affectionate, detailed and just. He has handled his great and complex task with detachment, and has succeeded in doing something which must have been very difficult indeed; that is, in describing the multifarious events and labours and interests and adventures of Belloc's torrential, centrifugal life, without ever obscuring his unity of character, centripetal in religious loyalty. He is seen, first and last, as a single human being; not as a volcano in ceaseless highly unpredictable eruption. This means, of course, that some of his personal impact is diminished; but many vivid impressions of that impact are available, with J. B. Morton's memoir as the most intensely vital of them all. The present biography is the first to give the facts, the documents, the time sequences, which form the bony structure of that long and vigorous life. For the most part Mr Speaight stands well away from his subject matter, and records without comment both the attractive and the unsympathetic aspects of Belloc. His childlike goodness and generosity and loyalty emerge, his overwhelming vitality, 'the spouting well of joy within', his capacity for friendship and singing and laughter; and so do his anti-semitism (neither soft-pedalled nor excused, but traced to French influences in his youth, especially that of the Collège Stanislaus where he spent some formative months) and his lack of imaginative sympathy. Of his failure to gain a Fellowship at All Souls, that failure which embittered him to the end of his days, his biographer writes that it probably arose not from any lack of scholarship or of brilliance, but quite simply from the Fellows' reluctance to admit 'to their midst a man who monopolized every conversation'.

¹ *Hilaire Belloc*. By Robert Speaight (Hollis and Carter; 30s.)

Towards the end of the book, however, Mr Speaight allows himself some flashes of tenderness—as in his loving, perceptive account of King's Land—and of personal reminiscence. Oddly enough, the sequel to one such reminiscence serves to show how flexible Belloc's intelligence remained, even in extreme old age. Mr Speaight writes of asking him, a few weeks before he died, 'Did the French Revolution accomplish more harm than good?', and of receiving the reply that it was necessary, 'otherwise society would just have withered up'. That this was not the reaction of a mind in which thought has atrophied into a conditioned reflex, is shown by Belloc's putting the same question to your reviewer on the following Sunday. The reply was, 'Yes, I think it did, because though changes that come about peacefully may do good, changes made by violence usually bring about more violence, as this did'. He was silent for a minute, playing with his pipe, which as usual was packed too tight and would not draw; then he said slowly and unwillingly, 'It is possible that you may be right. I must think more about it.'

There are two aspects of Belloc which Mr Speaight has left unnoticed, perhaps for lack of room. One is the fact that his profound distrust of British economic and financial thought and policy from 1688 onwards is shared by Marxist thinkers, though it led him to Distributism and them to Communism. It was this shared distrust which, as his autobiography shows, enabled Douglas Hyde to approach the Church through Belloc's writings; and may enable many more. The other is his life-long passion (born, like his early longing for war, of the smugness of the late Victorian period in which he grew up) for startling people into thought, and even for just startling them. *Epater le bourgeois* was a hobby which grew into a habit. Mr Speaight is so completely unconscious of this characteristic, with its ramification into practical jokes and general *blague*, that he quotes as an illustration of Belloc's lack of vanity a story about a little boy to whom he said, 'Now you will be able to tell your grandchildren you have shaken hands with Rudyard Kipling'. Many illustrations of Belloc's touching humility could be found; but this is not one of them. This was a leg-pulling gambit which had been used on the little boy's mother in her own childhood when Belloc and Kipling were simultaneously singing in different keys and rhythms the praise of Sussex (and who shall say even now

whether in the maps of literary regionalists it is described as the Belloc or the Kipling country?). The little boy, moreover, had not 'just been introduced to Belloc' but knew him well, and shared his love of shocking people. He was accustomed to such mysterious remarks, and had indeed that morning been jumping for joy at the prospect of going to King's Land, for, he said, 'Now I shall learn some lovely new songs and swears, and Mr Belloc will ask me which is the worst thing to say, bleeding or bloody. I *think* bleeding, don't you? Shall I ask at school, Mummy? My form mistress, Mummy?'

To those who knew Belloc only as a grown man (who, despite his small physical stature always seemed rather larger than life) the account of his parentage, his childhood, his groping youth, with its unfulfilled beginnings—should he be a sailor, a writer, a land agent, an architect?—and loose ends, will be of the most fascinating interest. Here is the flux whence crystallized that dogmatic, kind, explosive, iconoclastic, laughing figure which provoked alarm, delight, a self-defensive withdrawal, affection; and which seemed to have 'stood from everlasting to everlasting', a Fact of Nature, given, unarguable as a thunderstorm or a mountain. Here he is in the making, young and uncertain; here are the high spirits, the melancholy, the bursting irrepressible energy which determined the rumbustious style of later years. Here too—though the conclusion is not drawn—would seem to spring the source of that defiant *panache* which aroused such a violent partisanship, opposition and embarrassment in the world. His father died when the child was three years old, and he was brought up mainly in England by a brilliant and forceful mother, Bessie Parkes, who until her late marriage had not simply been devoted (in Mr Speaight's odd phrase) to 'the rather vague cause of Women's Rights', but had worked ably with Barbara Leigh Smith on definite, detailed projects to improve the appalling legal and economic position of Englishwomen at that time. It seems probable that the need for self-assertion so often seen in the sons of actively feminist mothers developed particularly strongly in this fatherless boy, urging him to an unconscious determination to be all that she was not: French; opposed to the freedom of women; opposed to the liberalism in which she had been reared; intolerant on principle; preoccupied with abstract ideas of power; drawn to support tyrannical male figures such as those of Napoleon and

Franco; fiercely extrovert and dramatic, in contrast to the introversion of most English poets and thinkers, inclined to shield their vulnerability by reserve, gentleness, understatement; depreciating the brilliant sensitive subtle Newman, whom his mother revered, as 'a don'; and so on perhaps even to anti-semitism.

This may seem a fantastic interpretation of the facts; and it is ill work trying to analyse genius. One should rather be grateful to Mr Speaight that those facts have been assembled in order; the background, the childhood, the schooling, the attempts at different professions; the dash by steerage to New York and onwards tramping and hitchhiking down to California to see the girl with whom he had fallen suddenly in love, the sad return, the service as a French conscript; the golden time at Oxford as undergraduate and then again as lecturer and coach after his long-awaited marriage; the writings, the election, the ups and downs of his parliamentary career; the buying of King's Land and the warm family life there; and then the decline in human happiness, the loss of his wife, the death of one son in the Kaiser's war and of another in Hitler's, the strenuous work, the travelling and seafaring in which peace was still to be found, and so to an old age sad but nevertheless full of friends, in which he still loved living so much that he would repeat, serious in spite of surface laughter, 'Have you ever considered the shortness of human life? *Something should be done about it.*'

The facts are there, set forth with careful objectivity. They are the material of the Belloc legend, but they do not diminish or dim it. That legend and that life remain, inexplicable, lovable, heroic in colour, size, adventure and fortitude.
