The Elusive Life of a Modern Pope

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One of the pleasures of reading resides in the flourishing condition of biography. According to publishing statistics, biographies sell better than any other genre of serious literature. Some, such as Leon Edel's five-volume life of Henry James or Michael Holroyd's three-volume biography of George Bernard Shaw, not to mention Martin Gilbert's monumental series on Winston Churchill, may seem so overwhelming as to tax even the most devoted student of other people's stories. Really great biographies, however, such as these all plainly are, only hold their readers in thrall to the next instalment. It was a long wait from Edel's first volume (1953), which got James to the age of twenty seven, to the final instalment (1972), but no reader once under Edel's spell would easily have lost patience. Even then, Edel's one-volume abridgment (1985), no doubt all that any reader but a fanatical Jamesian would now tackle, is arguably better still than the original work. But one could easily list a dozen other superb modern biographies H Tennyson: *The Unquiet Heart*, by Robert Bernard Martin (1980), for example, to mention only the one that has most recently come my way.

Peter Hebblethwaite records that, when he submitted one chapter of his new book, *Paul VI: The First Modern Pope* (Harper Collins, London, 1993, £35), to Archbishop Luigi Barbarito, Pro-Nuncio to Great Britain, for comment, he was told that it would not be possible to write a 'true and objective life of a Pontiff' for many years—'until access to all the documents is obtained'. That was probably only a diplomatic reply; but does a good biography necessarily depend upon access to every last piece of paper about the subject? Or, to put it the other way round, would access to all the files guarantee greater 'objectivity'? Indeed, would the biography of a pope ever be anything but a chapter in church history?

Tennyson died in 1892, Henry James in 1916, Shaw in 1950, Churchill in 1965—which might seem sufficient distance, even allowing for the fact that Martin Gilbert's first volume (with Randolph Churchill) came out in 1966. After all, it was still a long time since Churchill was a child and nothing much new was likely to surface about his ancestry and background. As far as waiting for access to all the documents is concerned, on the other hand, the case of Tennyson is quite instructive. Martin's magnificent biography is certainly truer and more objective

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than the two-volume life published by Hallam Tennyson in 1897—despite having no access to the large quantities of his father's letters which Hallam destroyed. The passage of the years does not always bring better documentation—but perhaps, at least in the Tennyson case, the loss of so much primary material only prompted the modern biographer to draw on a much wider range of archives than Tennyson's son could even have known about.

Even in the subject's lifetime, as John Campbell's recent *Edward Heath: A Biography* (1993), demonstrates, it is perfectly possible, at least with with nearly 900 pages at one's disposal, to write what has been widely recognized as a full and fair account of a complicated man's life. No doubt, fifty or a hundred years from now, with hindsight and more abundant documentation, perhaps including Heath's own archives, a different biography will become possible, and indeed mandatory, given his place in British political history. But it is hard to imagine that a future biography would be all that nearer to the ideal of being 'true and objective' than Campbell's very fine study.

One way or another, there are no simple prescriptions for writing great biographies. It also does not matter much what sort of thing the subjects of the best ones did with their lives—whether they were poets or politicians, rascals or respectable citizens. One oddity, however, given the substantial number of Catholics in the English-speaking world as well as the immense media-generated interest in the papacy, is the dearth of good biographies of modern popes, or indeed of any popes. In fact, apart from Peter Hebblethwaite's own *John XXIII: Pope of the Council* (1984), it is hard to think of any pope since Gregory the Great (died 604) who has received anything like serious and substantial biographical treatment (I am thinking of *Consul of God*, by J. Richards, 1980). True enough, most of the popes have led pretty unmemorable lives (there have been about 260 of them); but it is surprising, as J.N.D. Kelly notes in *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes* (1980), that so few have received full-dress biographies. Even if as individuals most popes have been lacking in human interest, some of them at least have exercised influence in exciting times, for better and for worse. But they have not attracted biographers—in this, as in other respects, differing from Anglican church leaders (think of Owen Chadwick's splendid *Michael Ramsey: A Life*, 1990, two years after Ramsey's death).

So Peter Hebblethwaite, as a biographer of popes, is out on his own. If his treatment of his papal subjects is not sufficiently 'true and objective' it is not that we have anything better with which to compare it. There is no definitive biography of any pope.

Perhaps popes have attracted so little biography, then, less on

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account of the inaccessibility of archives than simply because they have not been regarded as very interesting human beings. Hebblethwaite tells us that Paul VI was a better subject for a biography than John XXIII 'because he was a richer and deeper personality, had more worldly contacts, and because his pontificate—fifteen years compared with four and a half—was of more decisive importance for the long-term future of the Church'. Well, does the story he tells bear out these claims? In particular, does the 'personality' emerge very clearly in this biography—as the subjects certainly do in the studies mentioned above?

Paul VI's parents first met on the steps of St Peter's on a pilgrimage to Rome in 1883 to receive Pope Leo XIII's blessing on the twenty fifth anniversary of his ordination as a bishop. Giudetta, aged nineteen and an orphan, was a ward of the ferociously anticlerical mayor of Brescia. Giorgio, aged thirty three, a prosperous lawyer and journalist, edited the local Catholic newspaper. Theirs was the society wedding of the year in Brescia, with page one treatment by Giorgio's staff. There were to be three sons. Lodovico, born in 1896, disappears from Hebblethwaite's story in 1943 when he had to take refuge from the Nazis with his brother in the Vatican. Francesco, born in 1900, showed considerable courage during the German occupation. In 1960, when the future pope was given a honorary doctorate at the University of Notre Dame, he 'choked up' President Eisenhower, a fellow graduand on this occasion, by giving him a statuette of a bronze angel holding several broken chains—a symbol of Eisenhower's role in the liberation of Europe. (The university authorities gave the President a Notre Dame baseball cap, a joke putter that broke in half when you swung it, and suchlike souvenirs.) The Montini family knew something about the evil of fascism.

Battista, as the family called him, was born on 26 September 1897. By his paternal grandmother's decree he was given a wet-nurse, a sturdy peasant some ten years older than his mother, in whose care he spent his first fourteen months. The big-eared peaky-faced little boy first got his name in the papers when, at four years of age, he and his older brother served the bishop's Mass at the blessing of a statue of Christ which his father had been largely instrumental in having erected on top of a nearby hill. All the boys were sent to the Jesuit school two minutes away from their home. Identified as '*vivace*', the young Montini had to sit at the front of the class so that he could be supervised more closely. At home their father would read Scott and Jules Verne to the boys, Giudetta would read to Battista in French (in which he was thus early at ease), while their *nonna* read them Wiseman's *Fabiola* (an extremely popular novel in Italy at the time). In 1907 the family had a private audience with Pope Pius X. The papacy was, as it were, as much part of a family

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outing as 10 Downing Street was for Harold Wilson's family or the zoo would be for most other folk.

When they were older the Montini boys came under Oratorian influence. Giulio Bevilacqua, in particular, a wild young priest in 1912 when they first met, who was to become a lifelong friend and confidant, agreed to become a cardinal in 1965 but on condition that he might remain parish priest of a working-class suburb in Brescia. He liked cycling, a novelty at the time, and the sport which Battista most enjoyed. When he was fourteen he inaugurated a new bicycle by riding sixty kilometres, mostly uphill, which alarmed his mother and 'nearly killed him'. By the summer of 1914, when he was sixteen, there were 'health reasons' for his parents to take the keen young cyclist away from school to finish his education privately. Later that year he confided to his best friend Andrea Trebeschi (another steadfast anti-fascist who was to die in a German concentration camp in 1945) that he would be a priest. About the same time, having had a '*stretta di cuore*' during a cycle ride, that left him gasping for breath at the side of the road, it seems to have been finally accepted that he was to be a permanent invalid. His desire to enter a monastery of exiled French Benedictines was thus thwarted by his supposed infirmity ('the rigours of monastic life' and all that). In 1916, at the medical examination for military service, Montini was rejected, as he expected, because of '*insufficienza toracica*'.

His best friend's brother was killed in action in July 1916. After several attempts Montini wrote a letter of condolence which includes the following passage: 'What is needed is that we should quietly close our eyes and gently, softly, peacefully, serenely, lovingly abandon ourselves to the current of our sorrow, whatever storms rage within or without us'—not bad advice, in the circumstances, from one eighteen-year-old to another, and perhaps prophetic for his endurance of the papal years to come.

Montini lived to within a few weeks of his eighty second birthday and was never seriously ill in his life or even in much pain until stricken with arthritis in his last years. But from late adolescence onwards it was assumed by everyone that he was sickly. He was accepted for the diocesan priesthood in October 1916 but, again because of his fragility, was allowed to live at home. He was ordained priest in 1920, still only twenty two, with his mother's wedding dress made into his chasuble. The bishop, who badly needed young priests at the time, nevertheless agreed to the Montini family's suggestion that their son should do further studies in Rome, again because the climate would allegedly be better for his health. He hated having to live in the Lombardy seminary, finding himself surrounded by young men who were 'much healthier

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than me, and therefore capable of arousing me unconsciously to emulation or envy'. Through one of his father's friends he was able to move to what was then called the Academy for Noble Ecclesiastics, the training school for Vatican diplomats. Complaining a good deal in letters home, he soon settled into the routine, spending a year in Germany (but failing to master the language) and then another year, again living at home and commuting to the Milan seminary, acquiring the necessary pontifical 'doctorate' in canon law. The family wanted him back in Brescia either in pastoral work or teaching in the seminary (no doubt living at home) but the move to Rome had started their son on a fatefully different path.

In June 1923 Montini took up a minor post at the nunciature in Warsaw. He hated Poland—'that damned language'! He was soon invoking his poor health, asking to be recalled to Italy. But his appeals seemed in vain and he sent for winter clothing. Then, quite arbitrarily, he was summoned to Rome, much to his delight. These three months were to be the sum of Montini's diplomatic experience outside Italy.

Quite mysteriously and unexpectedly, then, but no doubt through his father's connections (though Hebblethwaite does not say so), Montini found himself appointed chaplain to the Catholic students in Rome. Continuing to work as a minor bureaucrat in the Secretariat of State, he threw himself into the Catholic student movement (FUCI). With the rise of Mussolini this meant coming into conflict, increasingly, with fascist students. By 1925, when his anti-fascist father's newspaper had been closed down, the twenty-eight-year-old Montini found himself, as national chaplain to FUCI, involved in what was by then just about the only serious anti-fascist network in Italy. In 1928 he was attacked by name in the fascist press for being a 'meddler in politics'—a charge predictably (if implausibly) denied at once in *L'Osservatore Romano*. He did not share the general Catholic enthusiasm at the Lateran Treaty (1929), negotiated between Pius XI and Mussolini, guaranteeing the independence of the Vatican City and indemnifying the Vatican for the loss of the Papal States, but seeming to him little more than an exercise in fascist public relations. In 1931, after Catholic students had been beaten up in the streets and seen their premises attacked all over the country, the Catholic student movement was officially dissolved and their property sequestrated. Montini sat quietly with his breviary while the police searched FUCI headquarters in Rome and seized the files. He was accompanied by his friend Igino Righetti, well known as an anti-fascist student, who was to die young in 1939. His widow Maria was to remain Montini's closest woman friend, right to the end. He had carried Igino's love letters to her to avoid interception by the police. Their son,

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born after his father's death, was baptized Giovanni Battista in Montini's honour.

The decade with the Catholic student movement, surely the most formative years of Montini's life, training him in cunning as well as establishing his lifelong hatred of dictatorship, ended in 1933 when he was relieved of his post as abruptly and unexpectedly as he was appointed to it. He had asked to be freed of the office work in order to concentrate on helping the students, the more urgent task as it seemed. But Pius XI decided that Montini, now aged thirty five, had 'gifts destined to permit him to render services to the Church on a much higher level'.

The next thirty years of Montini's life make dire reading. In 1934 he had a summer tour of ancient cathedrals and modern Benedictine abbeys in Britain. Otherwise his days and long into his nights, from 1933 to 1954, were spent as an increasingly important official in the Secretariat of State. His life, in effect, becomes the story of his times, at least as they appeared to those immured in the Vatican. For many pages on end his biography is little more than a commentary on the activities of Pope Pius XII. One of the few revealing touches is that, on Christmas Day 1950, he had lunch with an old friend, a former priest, living in poverty in Trastevere. Although Archbishop David Mathew was telling G.L. Prestige in 1949 that he was likely to be the next pope but one ('Pius XIV'), Cardinal Griffin was being warned against Montini in 1954 by powerful officials in the Vatican. When he was appointed Archbishop of Milan later in 1954, his friends as well as his enemies apparently regarded this move to the see that had been graced by St Ambrose and St Charles Borromeo (not to mention its thousand churches and three and a half million Catholics) as demotion and defeat. The two removal vans required for his luggage, mostly his 8000 books, were carefully searched by Vatican officials before they were allowed to leave.

Men are pretty set in their ways by the age of fifty seven. In any case, nothing had prepared Montini to run a great diocese in a modern industrial city. Indeed, thirty years of bureaucratic labour and discretion should have disqualified him entirely. After his initial bewilderment, however, he set about building churches, meeting workingclass people, visitating parishes, and so on. But before it became clear how good a bishop he would be, the whole Church was thrown into turmoil. Despite the best efforts of a Swiss Protestant physician to rejuvenate him with injections of finely ground tissue from freshly killed lambs, Pope Pius XII died in October 1958, aged eighty two. He had mysteriously neglected to keep the college of cardinals up to strength, failing to make the Archbishop of Milan one of their number (but perhaps therein lies

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the mystery). Angelo Roncalli, Patriarch of Venice, emerged as Pope John XXIII. A month later he made Montini a cardinal. In January 1959 he announced the calling of an ecumenical council—which Pius XII had seriously considered in 1948 but shelved when he contemplated the difficulties and the expense (not that many people knew that).

The rest of Montini's nine years in Milan were thus dominated by Vatican II (as it was soon called). In 1948 he had not been in favour of the proposed council and Peter Hebblethwaite is surely right in maintaining that he would never have called one himself. On the other hand, providentially as one might think, he was certainly the man to see the Council through. Probably once John XXIII realized that it would take longer than a couple of months, and certainly after he knew that he was dying of cancer, he seems to have done his best to ensure that he would be succeeded by Montini. Again the biography descends into delicate intrigues and labyrinthine manoeuvrings in Vatican corridors and Roman chophouses (as far as these can plausibly be reconstructed without access to much in the way of primary documents). In the end, on 21 June 1963, Montini was elected and took the name of Paul VI. It seems implausible that his own candidate was Cardinal Lercaro of Bologna, as Hebblethwaite suggests: far too risky a figure. Vaticanology supplements biography at this point. According to Hebblethwaite, it was obvious to the cardinals at the fourth ballot that Montini was the one who would eventually get enough votes, but even at the sixth ballot, the following day, when he was elected, he had just two votes more than was required. In other words, at least twenty two and perhaps as many as twenty five, particularly of the Curial cardinals, held out against Montini, even when they could see what was bound to happen. Whatever the precise figures, it seems clear enough that Montini knew from the outset that he had a substantial number of opponents within the Vatican. They were, no doubt, mostly servants of the Church who, already in June 1963, were disenchanted by the effects of John XXIII's initiatives. The existence of this opposition surely explains why Paul VI's policy, from the first day of his pontificate, was to bring the Council to a happy conclusion and to cope with the aftermath but ambiguously enough not to drive anyone into schism. In fact, of course, he was unable to retain the loyalty of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, suspended *a divinis* in 1976 ('for thirteen years the greatest cross of my pontificate').

The fifteen years of Paul VI's life, biographically, once again become chapters in recent church history. For the most part, the human being disappears into the official role. The story is often little more than a record of contacts, worldly and otherwise. Just occasionally protocol is

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disrupted and the inner man is revealed—as for instance in the astounding scene on 14 December 1975 when the arthritic old man went down on his knees to kiss the feet of Metropolitan Meliton of Chalcedon (who 'sank to his knees as well and an obscure grappling ensued')—a spontaneous attempt to break fifteen centuries of Orthodox suspicion of papal imperialism.

On 26 September 1977 the Pope was eighty years of age. He struck the Anglican delegation who visited him in April as 'unable to concentrate for very long'. Cardinal Benelli's account of the interview on 17 May during which the Pope, having decided to appoint him to the archbishopric of Florence, broke down completely—'The tears were so abundant that they marked his blotter'—suggests that it was high time that he retired. (But there was a lot of weeping in high places in the Vatican all these years, as well as gnashing of teeth, if Peter Hebblethwaite is to be believed.) In August, at Castelgandolfo, his old friend Jean Guitton reports that 'the past was more vivid to him than recent events'. On 9 June he received in audience Hungary's murderous tyrant Janos Kadar and read a speech so diplomatic that it is painful to remember that only two years had passed since Cardinal Mindszenty's death (no admirer of Montini). But, if I may drop in my own twopence, I happened to be in Rome in 1977 and attended the Mass in celebration of his eightieth birthday in St Peter's on Sunday, 25 September, ninety minutes of what might almost have been any good parish family Mass except for the vast congregation, with the singing led by thousands of young choristers from all over Italy—and, once he had clambered up to his place, Paul VI looked very happy and relaxed throughout the entire service, an inexpressibly moving occasion I found.

So there is nothing better than Hebblethwaite on Paul VI, and certainly no definitive biography with access to all the documents will appear in our lifetime or perhaps ever. Popes, however rich and deep their personality, become figures in church history. Their lives are their times. The antifascist student chaplain in Rome, the keen young cyclist from Breschia, the restless boy at the front of the class, all disappear and we are left with a history of encyclicals, addresses, excursions, meetings and liturgical events. Access to any more documents (one feels) would only make Battista even more elusive.

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