

HILAIRE BELLOC

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Of St. Thomas More, Hilaire Belloc wrote, "But this much is certain, that of all those, and they were many, who bore witness in the five generations it took to root out their age-long religion from among the English, his would seem to have been the most complete passion; for he had nothing to uphold him except resolve."

You will find this in a little book called *Characters of the Reformation*. Belloc saw the Reformation as an unmitigated disaster, for Christendom as well as Christianity, and he never let the English forget how they had been led into schism. His portrait of More gives the martyr an unwonted relevance to our own times. More received no comfort from the hierarchy; only the Bishop of Rochester stood fast against the king. There is a lot of Belloc in Belloc's portrait of Thomas More.

Belloc was another layman whose loyalty to the Church was absolute. His youthful book, *Path to Rome*, recounts a hike he made to the Eternal City from the town in France where he had done his

military service. It acquaints us with a man of strong opinions, hearty appetites and lively faith. And it acquaints us with the distinctive voice of Belloc. "And entering I saw one of the women whom God loves. She was of middle age, very honest and simple in the face, kindly and good. She was messing about with cooking and stuff, and she came up to me stooping a little, her eyes wide and innocent, and a great spoon in her hand. Her face was extremely broad and flat, and I had never seen eyes set so far apart. Her whole gait, manner, and accent proved her to be extremely good, and on the straight road to heaven."

Belloc always sounds that sure, about things great and about things small. We sometimes hear of the 'triumphalism' of the pre-conciliar Church. Often this means merely the grateful confidence that one holds the true faith. On that basis, Belloc could be the patron of triumphalists. Alas, it is a dwindling band. Or, more accurately, a very different Church is touted where it is sometimes difficult to distinguish belief from unbelief. Christians feel less impulse to go teach all nations when it is intimated that in their own way the pagans have the Good News already. When Belloc was present one always knew there was a Catholic in the room, although an usher once kept pestering him to take a pew until Belloc swore at

him. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't realize you were a Catholic." Not many people made that mistake. When he ran for Parliament, Belloc brandished the rosary he said everyday so that if his constituents objected he would be spared the indignity of representing them.

It would be difficult to find a literary genre in which Hilaire Belloc did not excel, yet he is probably more read nowadays as a poet than as historian or novelist or essayist. And not just the serious poet he was, but perhaps even more as the author of comic verse for children. He was also artist enough to make his way across the continental United States doing portraits when he was on his way to San Francisco to woo the woman who would become his wife.

To think of Belloc is to think of G. K. Chesterton and Maurice Baring, but of the three it may seem to be only Chesterton who is still widely read. Belloc has fared better than Baring (though see Joseph Epstein's essay in his recent collection *Pertinent Players*), but he may seem to have fallen into obscurity.

It is certain that he is not read as much as he should be, but it would be wrong to think of him as neglected. No Collected Works is planned to match what Ignatius Press is doing for Chesterton, but he has attracted biographers. Robert Speaight's remains the standard, but the volatile A. N. Wilson has written a balanced life that, among

other things, puts Belloc's alleged anti-semitism to rest.

Belloc is said to have published a hundred books. Most of them are out of print and indeed difficult to find. But a surprising number are available in new editions. His prescient essay, *The Servile State*, is available from the Liberty Fund in Indianapolis, with a preface by Robert Nisbet. *The Cruise of the Nona*, easily one of his most remarkable books, has never been out of print (there is a Penguin edition). His *Complete Verse* was reprinted in 1988. Because of the number and variety of his works, it is not easy to get a fix on Belloc.

Half French, married to an American, Belloc was nonetheless quintessentially English. His style is pellucid, a model of clarity, logical progression, and elegance. It is a supple instrument, adaptable to prose and poetry, fact and fiction, journalism and history; one always reads Belloc with a sense of the inevitability of the phrasing. But this is on reflection. It is *what* he has to say that comes through first and powerfully.

Despite his enormous output, Belloc's career can seem a series of frustrated hopes. He had hoped to become a fellow of an Oxford college and spend his life as a teacher. He spent two terms in Parliament and came away soured on what modern democracy was

becoming. Belloc, either as professor or as politician, would have been a lesser Belloc. Even his writing came to seem more of a means than an end, the way to earn his bread, book following book. The comic poems, particularly those for children, were serious only in the way comic verse is. Still it was his ambition to be a poet that was unequivocally realized, however little his accomplishment is acknowledged. Let this triolet suffice to suggest its quality.

The young, the lovely and the wise

 Their face is set toward their going.

They pass me with indifferent eyes,

The young, the lovely and the wise,

And fill me with a long surmise

Upon my losing and my owing.

The young, the lovely and the wise

 Their face is set toward their going.

But it is the rollicking Belloc that has kept his name alive and will bring him back to a new generation of readers. This -- and I end with it -- is the end of his song on Pelagius.

Now the Faith is old and the Devil's bold,
Exceedingly bold indeed;
And the masses of doubt that are floating about
Would smother a mortal creed.
But we that sit in a sturdy youth,
And still can drink strong ale,
Oh -- let us put it away to infallible truth.
Which always shall prevail!