

MUGGERIDGE MANHANDLED

Or the perils of piety come late By Joseph Roddy

AND A BOLD BIT of front-cover art it is, given *Jesus Rediscovered* as the book's title. Below it, surrounded by candles, is a face looking older and less barberable than your usual Son of God's. Can it be a clean-shaven God the Father instead? Get right up next to it, and the face turns out not to be the Deity at all. It's the Author. That solemn countenance there in the flickerings, that's Malcolm Muggeridge — the most resoundingly monikered hack since William Makepeace Thackeray, the prickliest 67-year-old since George Bernard Shaw was 67, and a self-built tower of such certainty that before him, even McGeorge Bundy might sense doubt. For reasons to follow, be grateful that in Dublin there lives Owen Sheehy Skeffington, rejoicing in a name that out-remounds that of Christ's latest rediscoverer.

That Muggeridge has turned piety at his age is not all that edifying once it is remembered that sanctity roots easily in settings where the gamier sins of the flesh are beyond replay. Moreover, the man needed a new act. He could no longer wrest profit from recounting his ascent up the spiked pole of British journalism, from correspondent on the *Manchester Guardian*, to staff writer on Lord Beaverbrook's *Evening Standard*, and finally to editor of *Punch*. He says now it was all silly work that kept him peering through keyholes at the antics of the great for little spasms of obscene excitement. A few years back he settled in, as the lapsing Empire's crank-for-hire. For the smart weeklies, for the BBC's TV wing, and even as a guest preacher in English churches, Muggeridge simply muggeridged. He told how it felt to be holy, and pointed to the prevalence of sin. As rector of the University of Edinburgh (a one- or two-day-a-year job), he quit in a huff when the students wanted contraceptives served in their clinic. In Aberdeen, he railed against the Church's new compacts with Mammon. "How I envy the historian who, like Gibbon," he said, "will look back across the centuries at the hilarious spectacle of Marxist-Christian dialogues: . . . of pious clergymen attaching themselves to enraged mobs shouting for Black Power or Student Power or some other crazed shibboleth; of an



Anglican bishop in gaiters recommending *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Such lunacy, I assure you, is the despair of professional comedians." Now that's exemplary muggeridging. That's how the peeper at the keyhole for Lord Beaverbrook became a mercenary in the Army of the Lord Almighty.

Piety pays, as the Calvinists taught, but Muggeridge was out to make his pay twice. Since he saw the light, he had done enough holy pieces to fill a book. So why not fill one and get paid again? He cranked out an introduction, had himself interviewed for an epilogue, and stuffed the space between with sacred writings from his clip files. For a title he hit on *Jesus Rediscovered*. Just about anyone can write a book nowadays, but it takes a really serious writer to sell one. And what got Muggeridge to Dublin was the chance to unload a sales pitch, in the guise of an after-dinner speech, on about 200 Gaels.

After a round of pleasantries on why he came ("requests to address my fellowman have only afflicted me late in life, like prostate trouble"), on what it means to stand with Twiggy and General de Gaulle in Madame Tussaud's waxworks ("the only really great honor that can befall an Englishman"), and on how popular opinion might be foretold by studying Dr. Gallup's entrails ("the great difficulty is that it could only be done once"), old Muggeridge got into the peroration meant to move crates of *Jesus Rediscovered*s: "I say that men do not live by bread alone,

that our physical appetites destroy us, and that only by retreating from them do we live. We must escape from this accelerating lunacy into the other reality. That reality does not lie in power, or in sensuality. It lies in seeing beyond these, and the areas they dominate." Applause, applause, applause!

There arose then Owen Sheehy Skeffington, Irish senator, Trinity professor and professed agnostic who had never before seen Muggeridge. "I find myself cast in a role that is rather odd, that of *advocatus Domini*, defending Jesus against Malcolm," he said, "This evening, the appropriate text for me would be John XI, 35. But I don't intend to quote it until later."

First there was the writ of Muggeridge to read. "He calls the book *Jesus Rediscovered*, and seems to be under the impression that the news of this rediscovery will cause a sensation in heaven." To the speaker, the rediscoverer was all self-contempt. "I see Mr. Muggeridge," he said, "as a sort of latter-day Joad, with inside him a latter-day Frank Harris trying to get out" and the book as its author's atonement for a misspent life. "Well, I'm afraid I am not empowered to give him absolution. I find Mr. Muggeridge lacking in compassion, a hater of hope, a despiser of charity; and his faith, as he expresses it, is singularly unconvincing and unattractive. I end, therefore, quoting the text I referred to in the beginning: John XI, 35, which reads: 'Jesus wept.'"

In the *Irish Times* the next morning, the headline was MUGGERIDGE SERVED UP AT LITERARY DINNER. For two weeks, its letters column kept passing out leftovers. "I don't suppose the Senator even paid the two guineas for his dinner," a W. R. Dobbs wrote from Wicklow. Turned out that Dobbs was Muggeridge's brother-in-law. "Whatever its shortcomings in style may be, on every page of *Jesus Rediscovered* the reader will find evidence of the author's search for, to quote Cowper's beautiful hymn, 'a closer walk with God.'" That one was signed, right there in the paper, "M. Muggeridge." Two days later, the *Times* noted that the letter was from Muggeridge's wife. But the bleat of kin continued. "Sheehy Skeffington . . . went along and duly trounced Mr. Muggeridge and his book, and the papers duly com-

mented on all this, so that the rediscovery, and the book which records it, did not go unmarked. So what have the Muggeridges got to complain about?" The signer was Congor Cruise O'Brien. He's Sheehy Skeffington's first cousin.

A few days later, in London, Muggeridge was having tea with a vibrantly Christian youth named David Virtue and offering explicatory views of his night in Dublin to a visitor gathering little spasms of obscene excitement. "I gave them just the usual mixture of buffoonery and evangelism which is my hallmark," he began. Young Virtue laughed uncertainly. "The Senator's speech was slightly droll as a way of welcoming a stranger. He indicated I was some mixture of charlatan and crook." Virtue was cast down. "Well, that cold systematic skinning alive was unexpected. It was a little on the side of bad manners," Virtue nodded. The Senator's claim that there was a Frank Harris buried inside was just all wrong. "It's too silly to have any reaction at all," Muggeridge insisted, and then found a reaction: "What did he mean, that I am randy? Why, Frank Harris was notable for lying and for ----ing, and I don't think that I'm particularly prone to either." Virtue nodded.

Over in Dublin, Sheehy Skeffington was looking pleased. Why had he done it? Because there is no God but He has a sense of humor, he said. Then he remembered what Muggeridge had done years back to a book named *The Divine Propagandist* by Lord Beaverbrook. Muggeridge wrote that the only possible excuse for its existence was that in his declining years, Beaverbrook needed a tome of this sort to present at the gate of heaven. Sheehy Skeffington was pleased to think that by now, Muggeridge himself might have the same need. And how did he get chosen to speak that night? "They called from the Catholic bookstore, you know, and asked if I would. Well, I told them, 'You know now, that wouldn't be right, because I can't stand Muggeridge.' 'Well, come along then,' they said, 'that is just what we want.'"

So maybe the self-sanctified Londoner heading for Dublin nowadays with his new salvation should first try out the act in, say, Belfast, or Bogside. Or better yet, stay home, Malcolm, and pray.

END

DRAWING BY BOB SCHULENBERG