

MR. BELLOC, HISTORIAN

A WRITER in the *Times Literary Supplement* (29 January, 1949) devoted the whole middle page to a study of Hilaire Belloc, and gave sufficient praise to his prose but seemed to think his historical writing of little importance. The writer is generous in his appreciation of Mr Belloc as a man and of much that he stood for: 'It was an old joke against Mr Belloc that he not only spoke for Europe but he wrote as if he was Europe. Where is the joke now? The Europe he spoke for is shrinking fast, as he warned us. We may still reject his remedies: but Catholics and Protestants both now contemplate with dismay the threat to displace the icons of the Faith for the icons of the Kremlin, the Bible for *Das Kapital*.' That is finely said and is worth repeating. He concedes that Mr Belloc had ideas, whether we think them right or wrong, and 'Ideas are rare and become rarer, especially when they are based on experience, on a strong sense of fact'. That, too, is generously said, and is true. The writing of so many modern historians suggests nothing so much as the regurgitation of sawdust. But, the writer seems to think that Belloc's *History of England*, his books on Wolsey, Cranmer and Cromwell are of little account: '(they) have all the thrill that vigour of presentation can give to conviction. Still, they throw more light on their author than on the subject.' (It is odd that the writer nowhere mentions Belloc's French Revolution studies). There is a danger here of sacrificing truth to epigram. That the writer is of the opinion that Mr Belloc is exclusively interested in the past, in the Middle Ages in particular, is not our concern at the moment, but it is a little hard to accuse a man with a unique sense of the past of being a mere *laudator temporis acti*. The writer later seems to supply the right answer, somewhat inconsistently, in the last sentence of his article, 'Now the Servile State looms nearer who now can say Mr Belloc was a lesser prophet than the statisticians, the busybodies he brought to battle?'

No doubt it is a difficult matter to attempt an appraisal of Mr Belloc's historical work and for a trustworthy estimate a detailed examination of the historical writing of the last thirty years would be required. Still, it may not be useless to set out in a general way some of the main features of Mr Belloc's historical writing.

It would be a mistake to look to him for any major addition to historical writing in the field of research. He has not the temperament for research and a certain impatience with such study perhaps led him to undervalue its importance. But in several matters which engaged his particular interest, as, for instance, the origins of

Henry VIII's divorce proposals, he re-examined the evidence and acutely criticised the accepted conclusions¹. This is true of a great deal of his writing. He worked over familiar ground, consulting apparently the printed sources and probably taking much from the great French historians (e.g. Fustel des Coulanges), tested it by his own experience, knowledge of men, of terrain and so on, and brought to bear the scrutiny of his powerful mind on the whole mass of information thus assembled. One cannot imagine him following blindly the authority of any historian, however great, and it is no wonder that he came to conclusions markedly different from the 'official' ones. That there were certain strong convictions leading him to form certain conclusions is obvious to anyone with a slight knowledge of his work. He was in strong reaction to the Teutonic *Tendenz* of so much pre-1914 historical writing, and here the influence of Fustel des Coulanges, a fanatical Germanophobe, was excessive. This evidently led Belloc, with his deep love of the Roman Empire and all it stood for, to re-examine the whole of the Teutonic legend about the formation of Europe, including England. The results were seen first in what is really a magnificent pamphlet, *Europe and the Faith*, which exasperated the reading public, both Catholic and non-Catholic, at the time, and has done so ever since². Rome, both pagan and Christian, was the decisive factor in the formation of Europe, the Teutonic infiltration was neither so wide nor so lasting as was generally supposed, and all the virtues of modern Europe were not to be traced back to the splendid virility of Teutonic barbarians. It is characteristic that Mr Belloc went to the trouble of pointing out that Charlemagne was a Gallo-Roman, and, equally characteristically, did not produce any proofs for the statement. At least one reader has often wondered what they were. No doubt Mr Belloc assumed any fool could look them up.

However, *Europe and the Faith* was too vehement a statement to make converts; but the mere fact that the entrenched position had been attacked led others to look into the matter. In other places, in his occasional writings, and finally in the first volume of his *History of England*, he reiterated the same views more moderately. Many did not accept his particular way of supporting his conclusions—his philological evidence was looked at askance—but the fact is that Mr Belloc was a major factor in killing the absurd Teutonic legend of the late 19th century historian, a legend that nowadays reads like a parody of itself, in the pages of J. R. Green.

¹ See *Wolsey*, appendix G and H.

² Even Maritain gravely examines its implications in, I think, *Degrès du Savoir*.

The war of 1914-8 had something to do with it, and further exploration of Roman Britain has, I think, rather confirmed than weakened Mr Belloc's conclusions. He himself had an exceptional knowledge of Roman Britain, he had walked over miles of Roman roads and has known this island as few have ever done. A thousand small touches that could hardly be translated into print persuaded him he was right and lent an authority to what he had to say that could not be attained by mere book-learning. That no doubt is why when people asked him for his 'authorities', he could only feel slightly annoyed and say nothing. You could either see the thing or you couldn't, and that was the end of it. Belloc probably never realised that we all have not the same powerful historical imagination that he has. He had re-lived the thing, tested it with his senses, judged it by the common data of ordinary human living and human probabilities; he saw it whole and naturally assumed that everybody else did the same—except of course remote and ineffectual dons.

This matter of the quality of Belloc's historical imagination is one that deserves serious and thorough investigation. It is a rare thing at any time, and is surely the secret of some of his finest writing. Perhaps with him it is a mode of poetry. However that may be, another contribution he has made to modern historical writing is the restoration of life and colour to it. In his earlier days he was fond of quoting Michelet's phrase 'History is a resurrection of the flesh', meaning, for Belloc at any rate, that the historian must strive to bring back a past age in all its variety and wholeness and get all the details right down to the last button on the meanest soldier's gaiter. We must be able to *see* it all. It means, too, an attempt to *understand*, to put on the mind of the people one is writing about, and though Belloc himself was not conspicuously successful in this last³, the complete failure of the academic historian in this respect, and his pettifogging middle-class, provincial judgments in historical matters earned him Belloc's undisguised contempt. Equally exasperating was Belloc's expressed assumption that he knew what the Middle Ages were about because he was a Catholic. Yet of course this is true. There is a real continuity of life in the Church and only a Catholic who has lived by the Mass can appreciate what its suppression meant whether by interdict in the Middle Ages or by the Reformers in the sixteenth century. The seeming arrogance with which he set out his claim to pre-eminent understanding of a past age was probably as much responsible for the pained anger that it called forth, as the claim itself. This however is only one aspect of the matter. In the understanding of

³ In the sense, at any rate, of analysing human motives.

Europe as a whole and the Roman and Christian foundations on which it was built, Belloc was exceptional, if not unique, in his time. He understood the significance of the major factors of history, and through this was able to achieve a resurrection of the past that was nearer to the truth than the pale liberalistic picture of late nineteenth century historians. In any case, his view has affected subsequent writing and if there is a deeper understanding of Europe now than there was in 1910 it is at least partly due to Belloc⁴.

In historical biography it seems to be largely forgotten nowadays that Belloc was a pioneer in the presentation of historical characters in the round, in the laborious search for the significant detail, as witness his *Danton* (published some fifty years ago), his full and magnificent study of *Marie Antoinette* (1909), and, to a lesser degree, his *Robespierre*⁵ (1901). He has little in common with Philip Guedalla and still less with Lytton Strachey, but he was probably responsible for showing them, by example, the instruments of their trade. Even in his later biographies which are stripped of all but necessary detail, his portraits make a deep and vivid impression on the mind. There is the swift drama of his *Wolsey*, the cool dissection of *Cranmer*, written in a mellow prose rarely achieved by any other historian in long tracts of historical writing; there is his *Cromwell* in which he shows his contempt for the *nouveaux riches* of the Reformation. With the Stuarts he was less successful. His *Charles I* is really an explanation of how he came to die; his *James II* is marred by haste, yet even so it seems to have had something to do with the subsequent rehabilitation of the later Stuarts; and his book on Charles II, *The Last Rally*, was apparently written merely to complete the Belloc thesis on the loss of the monarchy.

In looking back over his work one can only regret that he did not concentrate his efforts to produce a full study of Louis XIV or Napoleon. *Monarchy*, on Louis XIV, is a mere sketch, covering an enormous amount of ground in a short space, enlivened by Belloc's personal view of the character and times of Louis, but too short to be convincing. His *Napoleon*, again short, is nothing more than a series of essays, some of them very delightful, in which he returns for a few moments to his earlier style of *Marie Antoinette* and *Danton*. *Richelieu* is a magnificent book by any standards and one that seems to have been greatly neglected.

The last great work we have space to refer to here is his *History*

⁴ The broad lines of his view have been corroborated by subsequent writers: e.g. Christopher Dawson's *The Making of Europe*.

⁵ This last contains some magnificent prose, cool, clear and resonant.

of *England* which, alas, is unfinished, though his English biographies are all outcrops of the *History* carrying forward his thesis to the abdication of James II⁶. In the *History of England*, written for the most part in a stark, undecorated prose and shorn of picturesque details, we find most of Belloc's characteristic views. About the first, the extent and depth of the Anglo-Saxon invasions, we have already said something. A similar point of view can be observed in Belloc's treatment of William and the Conquest of England in 1066. Harold with his gang was not a glorious national leader but a turbulent and traitorous lord and any claim he had to the throne was negated by his oath, in captivity, to William of Normandy. To other historians the matter is not so clear but Belloc weighed the probabilities and comes down firmly on the side of William. He states his opinion clearly and gives his reasons for holding it. At any rate we know where we are with him. At the same time, his strong conviction that the Norman Conquest meant for England re-union with Europe no doubt had something to do with his decision. Whether professional historians have paid much attention to him in this matter is doubtful, but the old romantic view that all that was good in the English tradition was Anglo-Saxon is certainly quite dead. He was equally impatient of the theory that derived parliamentary government from the splendid independence of our Anglo-Saxon forefathers, and is fond of pointing out that the first assemblies of this kind are found in South Western Europe. Again, characteristically, he underestimates the English development of representative government.

Another matter he has emphasised more than most historians is the importance of the Black Death as the major cause of the decay of the Middle Ages. Others, while recognising its importance, would not go so far as Belloc, and perhaps his chief fault here was in neglecting other factors. Subsequent study has, I think, shown that they were very complex.

But it is with the sixteenth century and the Reformation that Belloc displays an independence that has had strong reactions both by way of disagreement and imitation in subsequent historical writing. Perhaps his most characteristic thesis is that the English Reformation was a revolt of the new-rich against the Crown and the People of England of whom the king was a sort of sacramental embodiment (the medieval theory). The *permanence* of the Reformation settlement was ensured by the desire of the newly-enriched

⁶ Nor should we forget Belloc's profound regard for Lingard and the fact that he wrote a continuation of his *History* carrying the narrative up to the 19th century. Apart from this, Belloc has rarely written on the 19th century England.

to hold on to monastic loot and the power it had given them. Cecil, cold, cynical and religiously negative, was the great architect of established Protestantism and Elizabeth hardly more than a flamboyant figurehead. It followed necessarily then, when by 1603 the new landed class had firmly entrenched themselves in the social structure of the country and when the royal income, under the impact of the new economy, had shrunk to unmanageable proportions, the Crown would be attacked and if not abolished, then shorn of all its power. The story of how this took place and was successfully consummated by the eventual 'usurpation' of Dutch William is the chief interest of the seventeenth century.

This, ruthlessly simplified, but I hope not caricatured, is Mr Belloc's view of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Probably few people and no professional historians will endorse the whole thesis. Mr Belloc has a weakness for oversimplification and he admits somewhere that he has little understanding of the tortuous ways of the human heart. In his analysis of the causes of the Reformation he strangely underestimates the religious issue. As he admits in *How the Reformation Happened*, there was a good deal of hostility to the Papacy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, though he does not seem to have given prominence to the intense desire for spiritual renewal that was everywhere in Europe. The violence and virulent pamphleteering of the reformers, their manifest desire to destroy the Church are indeed very difficult for us to understand nowadays, and yet one has the suspicion, unworthy perhaps, that Mr Belloc saw the Continental Reformation mostly as the uprising of the untamed, eternal Teuton against European culture. It is true that the standard view of historians was, and perhaps still is, that the Reformation was, on the whole, a Good Thing, and it was a rather shocking novelty when Mr Belloc showed that he thought it was a Bad Thing⁷. But whatever the defects of his treatment of the English Reformation, Belloc cleared away a good deal of the romantic nonsense that had obscured the truth and threw into high relief the economic aspect of the change of religion. No one is likely to ignore that now, even if historians weigh other factors more patiently and scrutinise human motives more keenly, than Mr Belloc is wont to do. This, we can say, is an acquired position and Belloc must be given the credit that is his in capturing it.

The 'Reign of Cecil' thesis is much more controversial and what is required is a full revelation of the evidence by which it is sup-

⁷ Perhaps it is his point of view in historical matters rather than his methods that has given most offence, and certainly thirty years ago English historical writing had a distinctively insular flavour.

ported. If it is not more than inference then the controversy is not likely to be settled. One or two talented disciples of Mr Belloc have made the thesis their own and urged it with force but they have not revealed their sources either. Whatever may be the truth of the matter Belloc's view has acted as a corrective, and the mood of sustained panegyric that marked the writing of nineteenth century historians whenever they touched the Age of the Reformation, is no longer possible⁸.

When we come to Mr Belloc's treatment of Charles I and the destruction of the monarchy he seems to me to be almost wholly right. If one asks the question: why did Charles I lose his head? the answer is that, on the one hand, the king could no longer live on his own, and, on the other, that Parliament was determined to scoop power into its own hands. Only thus could its recently acquired position in the country be secured. Granted that Charles had faults of temperament and made bad tactical errors, granted that there was a good deal of religious fanaticism to inspire action on both sides and a strong current of republicanism amongst the Puritans, yet all these were subsidiary to the main cause which was an economic one. Surely, too, Belloc was right in holding that the Parliamentarians did not stand for the liberties of the people of England but only for their own social class, the men of expanding wealth and property. It is difficult to make sense of the seventeenth century struggle on any other theory and it seems to have met with a wide measure of acceptance.

There are many other aspects of Mr Belloc's historical writing that need consideration for any adequate estimate of his contribution to history. There are his outstanding contributions to military history, a subject in which he has generally been regarded as a master. There is his excellent introduction to the French Revolution in a perennially useful little book of that name. There are the superb exercises in imaginative historical writing, in exquisite prose, in his *Miniatures of French History*; and we have no time more than to mention his own fine writing on Cranmer's prose and the influence, almost certainly excessive, that Belloc attributes to the *Authorised Version* in popularising the English Reformation⁹. But a more than usually careful piece of work on the number of Catholics in the seventeenth century deserves more than passing mention. Belloc

⁸ I do not suggest that *all* is due to Mr Belloc's influence. He often reflects the main current of historical research, even when criticising it. His view of Drake and his companions is endorsed, even if less savagely expressed, by the best modern historians.

⁹ Perhaps the same should be said of a similar opinion on the *Contrat Social* and the French Revolution.

treats of the matter more than once, first in his *James II* and secondly, more fully, in *Cromwell*. It is, I believe, an original contribution, and, if all his terms are carefully weighed, must be very near the truth. His view received support in Brian Magee's *The English Recusants* (1938) which was the result of original research into the matter.

Another matter that deserves attention is Belloc's emphasis on tradition, if only because it was responsible for bringing him in conflict with two well-known Catholic historians—Father Thurston, S.J., in the *Month* and Father Philip Hughes in the *Clergy Review*. When Belloc began writing the fashion among historical scholars was to keep their noses close to the written document or to its exact equivalent (stones, coins, etc.) and to refuse to make a statement that could not be supported by them. They neglected or repudiated 'traditional' lore and often failed to test their views by common probabilities and what we know of life and men. Often they could not see the wood for the trees, and when they came to a period like the Middle Ages, they failed to see its meaning. That is why, as we have said, Belloc with his sense of Europe and his understanding of the Faith, felt an immeasurable superiority over the dry as dust historian. But it also led him in one or two minor matters into what most sober critics regard as error. One example is his refusal to abandon the legend, recorded in St Bede (*Hist. Eccl.* v, 24) of the sending by Pope Eleutherius of missionaries to England in 167. No scholar can accept this statement now. Bede's statement is almost certainly derived from a sixth century edition of the *Liber Pontificalis*, which is notoriously unreliable¹⁰. In other directions, however, Belloc's emphasis on tradition has borne fruit. His measurement of the passage of time by the human generations and the possibilities of the handing on of information from one generation to another (of which Mr Belloc supplies several interesting examples) is a valuable *mise-au-point* that has, I think, had its effect.

'Judgment is the essence of history'¹¹. This is the criterion by which Mr Belloc must be judged as an historian. He has not sought to add laboriously fact to fact or to supply new facts. He has striven to judge them, to find their meaning. Too often, the historian evades this risky task, and if Belloc has sought a pattern in history and set it down in clear writing for all to read, he at any rate has not shirked what he conceives to be the chief task of the historian. His judgment may be at fault here and there, he may have imposed his judgments too ruthlessly on events, his antipathies to certain

¹⁰ See Plummer's *Bede Hist. Eccl.* Vol. II, p. 14 (Oxford, 1896).

¹¹ *Wolsey*, preface (London, 1930).

things and people (Cromwell, for example) may have been too marked to allow him to do them justice; yet his unique historical imagination has inspired him to write fine history. Beneath the confusing diversity of our age he could see the Gothic substructure of the Middle Ages and beneath the Middle Ages the foundations of the Roman Empire. In writing of events he has never forgotten men, and in writing of men he has remembered that they were creatures of flesh and blood as we are. All around him and through his writing is a sense of reality which gives life and vigour to all he has done. It is for these things that in years to come, if our civilisation survives, the writing of Hilaire Belloc will fire the imaginations of generations yet unborn who in turn will hand on the tradition of Europe to their posterity.

J. D. CRICHTON.

DISTRIBUTISM

AN avowed and open defence of Distributism is not often seen in the Catholic press, and yet there is in this country a larger number than ever before of convinced distributists, people convinced that our attempt to concentrate on the mass-production of secondary commodities in return for food from abroad, to remain the workshop—or at least one of the workshops—of the world, and to treat the world as our farm and garden is doomed to failure—and indeed to disaster. The time is ripe, then, for a re-examination of distributism as a Catholic thing; but beforehand it will be worth while to look at some recent developments in the non-Catholic sphere. For the situation is very different from the time, forty years ago, when distributists might have been confused with the more or less unpractical followers of William Morris, broadly labelled ‘arts and crafts’. The situation is even very different from that of ten years ago. The theory and application of distributism have not changed but the situation of this country has changed so as to reveal not only the practical nature of this social idea but the necessity of it.

I cannot here deal with all the associations and periodicals which have some claim to be mentioned. But an introduction to any of those here noted would probably lead an enquirer on to others not referred to. Since the whole movement is bound up with the true cultivation of the soil, which should be distributed to each according to his rights, we may begin by mentioning the *Land Settlement Association* (43 Cromwell Road, London, S.W.7); although it has been over-commercialised in times past it does train men to