Muggeridge's Thirties

by PHILIP TOYNBEE

THE THIRTIES by Malcolm Muggeridge (Collins 36s)

THIS book was completed during the last month of the decade it describes 'in a barrack hut at Ash Vale, near Aldershot.' In the quarter-century that has passed since then Mr Muggeridge has become that Man You Love to Hate for a vast television audience; and the publishers must have calculated that the book will do better now than it did when it first appeared. I hope they are right. I believe they are right. For this is a superb book, though one which belongs to a very peculiar category.

It is certainly not a history of the thirties. Nor is it a study. Nor is it an evaluation, in any ordinary sense. Nor is it a satirical work, for it wasn't Mr Muggeridge's intention—it hasn't, in any case, been his achievement—to castigate the age from some clearly defined moral platform. What he *did* achieve, and with all his familiar gusto, was to make hilarious and bitter fun of the decade, to hold it up to ridicule, to present it exclusively in its most ludicrous aspects. His portrait of an age is entirely free of partisanship: every character, every episode, every popular movement is seen as rather unpleasantly grotesque. The light of ridicule is uniform and unblinking: there are no shadows, no chiaroscuro: there are infinite varieties of folly but no gradations.

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IS HE accurate? By no means. Is he caddish? Very often. Is he fair? Never. Does he write with compassion? Not a whit.

But does he write well? Beautifully; rising at times to an almost Gibbonian splendour of ironic invective. Is he funny? Exquisitely funny nearly all the time. Does he increase our knowledge of the period, and of human nature in general? I'm sure he does. We know very well that many painters have used deliberate distortion as the best means of revealing certain aspects of visual truth. So is it that the wholly mocking view of human history, though it cannot and does not claim to reveal the whole truth, helps to remind us of certain indelible human characteristics which we forget at our peril. We are all ludicrous some of the time: most public figures are ludicrous most of the time. Among much other pabulum for the historian the thirties undoubtedly provided the material for a monument to human folly; and it was this monument which Mr Muggeridge constructed in 1939.

In the immutable nature of life, it is necessary that every hope and every folly, all expense of passion, should be taken to its extreme. The Euclidian conclusion — 'which is absurd'—must constantly be demonstrated; *reductio ad absurdum*, more plausibly than dialectical materialism, may be taken as the principle which provides a key to human affairs. There is no stopping short; no moderate hope or folly, no moderate passion. Lear must go mad, Macbeth await defeat, David when he is old be covered with clothes and get no heat, the Rector of Stiffkey be thrown to menagerie lions, and MacDonald go down in a blaze of conferences, make what is in effect his last bow in the South Kensington Geological Museum to an assembly of representatives of all extant governments, not excepting Liberia.

These are Mr Muggeridge's principles, and this is his method of putting them into action. Whether they are adequate principles for a human being to live by is Mr Muggeridge's business and not ours. They are certainly adequate principles for the writing of a book which is not only funny but which sometimes emits the deep, penetrating boom of a prophet in full flight.

But I must add that these thirties are very different indeed from the ones that I remember. This is partly because Mr Muggeridge had reached his majority long before the decade opened, whereas I reached mine only in 1937. It is still more because Mr Muggeridge was a journalist, and one of national reputation, for the whole decade, while I was a schoolboy for the first four years; then a student; and then a journalist of profound local obscurity for about six months of 1938-39.

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THE real limitations of Mr Muggeridge's book do spring, I think, from his profession more than from the mocking stance he has adopted. It is the political journalist's world which he ridicules; and he sees no other world. Had he seen others he would, of course, have been able to ridicule them no less hilariously. But it is a pity that he was in no position to make fun of thirties books or thirties art or thirties sport; or indeed to write with any but the most perfunctory interest of daily life and its preoccupations. His panorama is too full of politicians and other top people, and even in the field of public events he wears the blinkers of his trade. Lord Rothermere gets four times as much space as President Roosevelt; and the single occasion when Muggeridge displays genuine compassion is in his grieving obituary of the *Morning Post*.

But, of course, the main difference between Mr Muggeridge's thirties and mine lies in the fact that I was a passionate partisan and he was not. True, he was some sort of a Communist fellow-traveller when the decade opened (but what an unthinkable concept that is today: Mug the Red!), and true, too, that he was later to become a hatchet-man for the *Daily Telegraph*. But by the time he came to write his book he must have long ago adopted the mask—or is it a face?—which we know today.

Before his derisive skull there stretched infinite pastures and mountain-ranges of human folly, and even Hitler, even Himmler, ceased to be devils as he pushed them forward to join Chamberlain and Churchill, Herbert Read and Lord Rothermere, Hemingway and Haile Selassie, the Rector of Stiffkey, Kingsley Martin, Lord Alfred Douglas, Gandhi and Gilbert Frankau in that preposterous square-dance of ungenial idiocy. Even for me there were few heroes left by New Year's Eve, 1939: but there were wicked men, less wicked men and some men who were trying to do good. If England and the world had lost that dazzling black-and-white variegation which they had worn for me in 1934, yet there were certainly some very dark blacks to be seen, and a few very pale greys.

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AND there was, of course, genuine drama still to be discerned in the clashes and conflicts of the age, whereas Mr Muggeridge brings to the whole scene the eye, both jaded and predatory, of a man who had covered nearly every international conference from 1930 to 1939. His mind is enormously conference-ridden — partly, perhaps, because there was no richer field for the harvesting of human idiocies. The conferences meant little to me, except when Chamberlain himself blundered into drama of a sort during the last two years before the war. Muggeridge *saw* top people in action: as I seldom saw any of them they remained large for me, even if they also had become largely tainted. Roughly speaking, I thought I saw a tragedy being enacted, while he was sure it was a farce.

But I feel no resentment at Muggeridge for writing his derisive book. That decade deserved this treatment, just as every other decade deserves it. I am glad that there are other ways of looking at history besides this one: I am glad, as well, that Mr Muggeridge made his scrutiny and wrote his strange, visionary report.

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