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Christian Biography: *Beyond the cult of personality?*

The full text of an address given by Dr Gaius Davies

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*The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (incurably sick);
who can know it? **Jeremiah 17:9***

*Remember those who rule over you (who lead you), who have spoken the word of God to you,
whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct*

Hebrews 13:7

Comment is free, but facts are sacred.

C P Scott, Editor, Manchester Guardian, 1921

Why do we read biographies and autobiographies? I should like to believe that there were always good and even lofty spiritual reasons for doing so. I think it is more correct to say that one of the leading reasons is simply *curiosity*. Perhaps also we partly *identify* with the heroic figures and compare ourselves with them. We want to know about other people's lives: the more special they are, the more successful or attractive, the greater their achievement, the more we want to know about them. Biography in recent times has become very popular. Christian biography is not always of the same high standard as some of the best of secular biographies. This may be because we sometimes show a lack of interest in God's sovereignty as it is seen in the world of writing and aesthetics.

It seemed remarkable to me that one of the first Christian autobiographies - *The Confessions of St Augustine* - should have been taken up by the French film star Gerard Depardieu (star of *Jean de Florette* and many other films). The tough Frenchman carries Augustine's *Confessions* with him everywhere, he said, and finds that it is changing his life: let us indeed hope so. We might then have a new Jansenist, who might go on to read Pascal as well as Augustine, and even get to read that other great Frenchman, John Calvin, who wrote *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

There is one other thing that biography may do: it may prevent us being stuck in what someone called 'the parochialism of our own time, our own century'. We may live in a global village, but what we hear and what we read seems still to be the equivalent of village gossip. There is a world elsewhere, and if the past is a different country we ought to visit it more

often. History may not only be the stories of great men writ large, but at least the stories of what God has done by His grace in the past – in spite of men’s sin and the failures in the lives of so many saints - these stories can be uplifting and can open the eyes of our understanding. At the same time many of the stories are exhilarating and entertaining as well as being edifying.

In terms of what the New Testament teaches, I think biography may be called a study of those who make up the cloud of witnesses of which Hebrews 12:1 speaks. The clouds may not only be the Biblical heroes listed in Hebrews 11 and many other parts of Scripture, but also those who followed in their train, the many heroes and heroines of the Christian centuries. They belong to the Church Triumphant, and we who are still hopeful members of the Church Militant benefit from knowing more about them. One Welsh poet has said that it is our job to seek to “keep house among a cloud of witnesses”, a phrase which I think is a happy conjunction of getting on with ordinary life in the trivial round, the common task, while being aware of those who by their example remind us of the grace that enables us (as Spurgeon used to say) to ‘keep on keeping on’. We are exhorted in Hebrews (13:7) to *‘Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith’*.

We may of course still find excellent biographies: I find that shops have to order them, since they stock low price, low quality work much of the time. It is as if we often have to endure a ‘dumbing down’ of Christian literature. When I spent some four years or so writing sketches of eleven figures from Christian history for my book *Genius, Grief and Grace* I found there was - if you looked diligently - a wealth of first rate biography available. I intended my sketches to whet the appetite for the more solid food provided in the big books. I should like to describe - with the help of some of these books that I read in preparation for my own biographical sketches - what I think makes a good biography, and what the difficulties may be which arise because of what the media have long chosen to call ‘the cult of personality’. I will try to speak of ‘what I know, and testify of what I have seen’ as John’s first letter puts it.

What is the main function of biography? Is it not *to tell the truth* and as far as possible *the whole truth and nothing but the truth about the person whose life story is being told*? A sceptical reader may ask, with Pilate, the question: *What is truth?* Facts may be hidden, by a process of either suppression or repression. Sometimes this is easy to understand: it may be the family’s wishes, or the need to avoid giving offence to others mentioned in the biography, some of whom may be still alive at the time of writing. Let us consider some examples where biographers have been ‘economical with the truth’ as a Cabinet Secretary once put it.

Take the example of *William Cowper*, one of the best-loved poets and hymn writers of his time, and one who continues to be of great interest. I felt I had to tackle the story of Cowper, and found there were at least twenty biographies available. I decided to try and read his letters and memoirs, and bought a number of sets of these letters. I felt it was a triumph for me when I bought the earliest edition of Cowper’s letters published within a year or so of his death in 1800. But the editor had carefully removed any reference to his depressive illnesses, which was precisely what I wanted to know more about. I bought three other sets of Cowper’s letters published over the years, and all had shown this marked reticence about Cowper’s depression. Only when the Oxford University Press brought out a five volume edition of Cowper’s letters were we at last able to find all that Cowper wrote, without the expurgation of passages that the editor thought too delicate or upsetting for his readers. It is often easy to see why such excisions and deletions are made, so as not to cause any upset to readers. In one way of speaking of it, a kind of cult surrounding Cowper kept some important facts and truths about him, away from our proper study of them.

One of the most popular biographies of Cowper is by Lord David Cecil, who called his book *The Stricken Deer*. It is a remarkable book which has been rightly criticized on two counts, because Cecil does not really have any feeling for Cowper's friends or for Evangelical Christianity, and is often wrong about his depressive illnesses. He is also wrong about John Newton who did so much to care for Cowper. It is worth listening to the way Cowper describes one aspect of his conversion:

I was a stricken deer that left the herd
Long since; with many an arrow deep infix
My panting side was charged when I withdrew
To seek a tranquil death in distant shades.
There was I found by one who had himself
Been hurt by th'archers. In his side he bore
And in his hands and feet the cruel scars.
With gentle force soliciting the darts
He drew them forth, and heal'd and bade me live.

Cecil dismisses much of this moving experience by saying Cowper moved from delusions of religious melancholia to religious mania: it was ever thus, when such an account is written without the necessary understanding and empathy.

One comment Cecil makes about John Newton may be worth quoting: that Newton was often ready to bewail the fact that he was a great sinner, but he was not willing to admit that he was ever wrong. A pardonable exaggeration, which may be true of any of us from time to time!

In the case of *George Fox*, the remarkable first Quaker leader, he simply tore out those parts of his *Journal* and *Letters* which he did not want anyone to read after his death! To try and reconstruct such lost passages may be hard work. Fox certainly did not believe facts were sacred, nor was comment to be free.

Such constraints about sensitive areas of a life are understandable, but the New Testament guidelines seem to be that we should not neglect the earthen vessel, the jars of clay, in which the treasures of the Christian's life may be found. In fact it is made clear that the weaknesses and the failings inevitable (owing to the in-built imperfections of fallen human nature) in any person's life may be used and become strengths that are much used and blessed in God's service. As the Apostle Paul puts it: 'when I am weak then am I strong'. Even the image of earthen vessels may be misused: I recall a prayer of one of my old Calvinistic Methodist ministers who prayed: '*Lord, burnish these vessels so that they may shine*'. He missed the point that the treasure within, not the outside of the vessel, is what mattered in the Apostle Paul's use of the metaphor of having treasures in jars of clay. Much that we collect in our own jars of clay may be junk - of absorbing interest to some psychiatrists perhaps, but not of any concern to most people.

Hero Worship and Idolatry

Many of us seem to have a great hunger for heroes and heroines, and the insatiable appetite for stories of men and women who can be admired and adored creates a market for memoirs and biography. Where hero-worship, excessive admiration or the considerations of the person who is a leader of a party, then it seems inevitable that the stronger the personality, the more likely it is that a cult forms around him or her. There will be those of whom it will be said that their admiration leads them to a sad state where the leader's style of thinking or speaking dominates their own: '*as if their whole vocation / were endless imitation*' (*Wordsworth*).

The cult leader may or may not accept the fact that there are followers who hero-worship their leader. It is always important to remember what Adlai Stephenson once said: 'Flattery is fine, provided you don't inhale'! Tolkien (of *Lord of the Rings* fame) who certainly became the hero of a cult - a fact which he abhorred, as did his friend C S Lewis. Tolkien said that there was no idol, however small, which did not somehow seem to enjoy the smell of incense

rising to tickle his nostrils.

The more any measured criticism is resented by the followers of a Christian leader, the more such sensitivity may be a guide to the excessive adulation and cult status of that leader. For example, when one compares the early missionary work and writings of *Amy Carmichael of the Dohnavur Fellowship in South India* with her later years of dogmatic, autocratic rule over the Fellowship, the more one wonders that the women who followed her closely and took vows of celibacy and obedience with her could say: 'we knew she was a sinner but we could not see it'. I recall one highly respected Christian bachelor telling me that one of the reasons he had not married was that many British women were devotees of Amy Carmichael and they distained marriage!

In my own chapter on Amy Carmichael I have said how inspired I was as a medical student to read her own classical account of the Dohnavur Fellowship and its work in her book *Gold Cord*. I have then tried to trace how such a heroine became a difficult and despotic leader. A missionary who had retired to our home church and who was ninety when she spoke to my wife about her time in Dohnavur assured her that my account was not harsh, saying I was not hard enough on Amy in criticizing her later years. To try and learn the truth about such a heroine is bound to involve some disillusion: yet her gift of writing in her early accounts of her work, her poetic gifts, her spiritual insights and her personal devotion to Christ - these considerations far surpass all her faults and foibles, and remain a lasting achievement.

To seek to understand the whole person is to refuse to believe anyone can be perfect, and like Oliver Cromwell to insist that the portrait be painted 'warts and all'. To seek out and describe the failings and the failures is not to belittle or to demean anyone. We are bound to learn more of the deceitfulness of the human heart, in Christian and non-Christian lives. It is meant to encourage us all to know that, even with such imperfections, frailties and foibles as exist in the best of men and women, God's grace can bless, over-rule and use such people to His glory. It sometimes seems that the very weaknesses can be the things which lead to a special vocation or blessing.

If *Alexander Cruden* had not been so eccentric, would we have had Cruden's Concordance? Let us not forget another secular modern example: *Winston Churchill* was rightly admired as a great leader, and has been the subject of countless books. But when Graham Sutherland was commissioned by Parliament to paint his portrait - claimed by many to be one of the best things he had ever painted - the family disliked the portrait so much that it disappeared and was apparently destroyed. Macmillan's new memoirs point up many deficiencies in the great man, headlines last weekend as 'The Madness of Churchill'. The great man himself referred openly to 'the black dog' of his depression over many years. His physician Lord Moran had broken many medical rules by publishing *The Struggle for Survival*. But the portrait, perhaps in its insight into Churchill's character, went further than his wife and family wished, and the portrait by Sutherland had, apparently, to be destroyed.

Biography as a novel: fiction or faction?

A new biography from the U S A may serve, for me, to condemn *the life written as a novel* - the so-called '*faction*' type of book or documentary. I read the '*faction*' account of Amy Carmichael with some difficulty - the author pretends to know what sort of conversations were being shared with others, and makes a heroic life read like a novelette. It goes without saying that the biographer thus misses the most important and poignant issues in the remarkable story of the founding and development of the Dohnavur Fellowship in South India. This brief life was one of many now on the shelves of Christian bookshops: I cannot say if they are all equally bad.

One recalls, as better example of fiction being used to try and show the truth of a life, the story of the Puritan **Richard Baxter** as told by the late A Morgan Derham under the title *No Darker Rooms*. Derham's novel was regarded with suspicion by such fanatics for the Puritans as I was at that time, together with many other students of Baxter, Owen, Sibbes and the rest. Perhaps the most outstanding example of fiction used in Christian biography is the work of Helen Waddell called *Peter Abelard*: but that book was based on years of study of the wandering scholars of the Middle Ages, and an unrivalled knowledge of the theological and historical background to the strange and tragic lives of Heloise and Abelard. One emerges from a proper reading of such a 'fiction' knowing more about the doctrinal background, as well as the people involved in the church of the twelfth century. Helen Waddell's father had been a missionary who went from Ulster to Japan and translated the Scriptures there. Helen Waddell herself has been made the subject of a very good biography where we may trace her course from a devout home to studies in Belfast and leadership in the Christian Union there and finally to Oxford and later fame as a scholar and writer.

A visit to The Inn of the Sixth Happiness

Let me give, as an example of the cult of personality, the story of Gladys Aylward. She is described as follows in Chambers' Biographical Dictionary (1997):

Gladys Aylward 1902 - 70 *English missionary in China*

Born in London, she left school at 14 to be a parlour-maid, but her ambition was to go as a missionary to China. In 1930, she spent all her savings on a railway ticket to Tientsin in Northern China, and with a Scottish missionary, Mrs Jeannie Lawson, founded the Inn of the Sixth Happiness in Yangcheng. From there in 1938 she made a great trek across the mountains leading over 100 children to safety during the war with Japan. After nine years with the Nationalists caring for the wounded, she returned to England in 1948, preached for five years, then in 1953 settled in Taiwan as head of an orphanage. The 1958 film 'The Inn of the Sixth Happiness', starring Ingrid Bergman, was based on her life.

I shared in the general interest in Gladys Aylward and bought three biographies: in one by Alan Burgess he quotes Miss Aylward's admission that she spied for the Chinese, doing so with a good conscience because she had taken Chinese citizenship. But last year, when I read the biography, by Frederick Tatford, (called **David Davies : Missionary Hero** Wester Press second printing 1972) I formed a different view. The book - and the story behind it - I owe to the kindness of a friend who knew David Davies in China.

It is a remarkable story, for David Davies and his wife Jean knew Gladys well, and sought to persuade her that in the war between the Japanese and the Chinese in the late thirties the mission station should be strictly neutral. Davies was her supervisor and ran the parent mission compound of which Gladys Aylward's 'inn' was an outstation. But Miss Aylward would not listen, - she refused the advice and continued to use her job as a foot inspector - (trying to stop the tight binding of the feet of little girls, a practice that had long been fashionable in China) - and later as evangelist, to spy for the Chinese. After she left for safety (with about 100 children) the Japanese arrested her boss David Davies and subjected him to cruel torture and five long years of imprisonment. The Japanese felt sure that Davies had supported Aylward in her spying, and produced evidence they thought confirmed this. The story of his survival of brain washing as well as all the other inhuman treatment is a far greater testimony to God's grace and faithfulness than Aylward's life was, even in its most glamourised form.

To my mind, such relevant truth was totally left out of the story of Gladys Aylward, thus creating a false impression; and a story which omitted things like this was far from the truth: yet it was allowed to grow and circulate. Millions saw the depiction of the story in the film about her. Miss Aylward seemed to enjoy the cult status that grew around her. Yet, the man who suffered so much because of her misguided work of spying is not known, and when he

returned from China it was hard for him at first to find any work in this country, though he did serve the churches well in the years after World War II, as a minister in the Calvinistic Methodist Church of Wales' Forward Movement.

If we think further of China we might consider the great **Hudson Taylor** briefly: what I recall when I was given his two volume biography by kind friends on my twenty first birthday was how the authors skated over Hudson Taylor's early breakdown and many other facets of his life. No one suggests that Hudson Taylor became a cult leader, but it is worth mentioning a native Chinese known to the Christian world as **Watchman Nee**. His two main books *The Normal Christian Life*, and *Sit Walk Stand* (an exposition of Ephesians) are still in circulation having sold widely: many millions have been sold. The churches and movement that he founded and led did, in my view, show some features of the cult of personality. Perhaps the most well-known biographies in Britain were those of the late Dr Angus Kinnear (*Against the Tide – The Story of Watchman Nee* 1973) and Leslie T Lyall in his book *Three of China's Mighty Men* 1973)

The Christian groups that were formed in China ('The Little Flock Movement') seem to be evident examples of cults and sects separated from the wider Christian churches. In Britain and America there are still centres in this country which still follow Watchman Nee's teachings. In pure cult form, it was one of the sillier features that the women followers always shared the same hairstyle - rather as many older folk may remember the hairstyle of the Christian bun in which so many devout women seemed forced to wear their hair. Of course, apart from the cult features of Watchman Nee there are many readers who find in his writings an introduction to New Testament teaching.. Nee's continued popularity in the post-charismatic world seems to be mainly because of the ease with which he can be read, and the way his teaching fits in with much of charismatic experience. It was drawn to my attention that in the February 2003 issue of the monthly US journal *Christianity Today* , there is an account of how Watchman Nee's followers in the USA have successfully sued two publishers for saying their churches were cults – millions of dollars were paid out and one publisher was made bankrupt by the litigation by the 'Local Church' movement which sued because they had been called a cult.

Storytellers and Mythmakers

Like many people I love a good story and if it is well written it grips you and if the story is based on fact, the effect seems much greater. A secular example may help to make a point.

I bought, like many thousands of others, the books of Laurens van der Post: his story is another good secular example of what can go wrong in biography. Sir Laurens became a sort of guru in old age and a great influence on Prince Charles, Prince of Wales. He was a well-known figure of the British establishment, famous across the world.

His family commissioned a biography, written by J D F Jones under the title ***Storyteller: The Many Lives of Laurens van der Post*** (2001). A glance at such a secular biography is worth it because it shows how I, and many others, were deceived, since the man was a liar, a fantasist and a mythmaker. It is greatly to the credit of his own family that they did not interfere with the author's telling of the truth, and it is a triumph of the author that he can rate his subject's achievements so highly even when showing the darker side of van der Post, his failings and his fabrications.

You may think that Christian biographies do not have such problems: I would point to the lives written of **C T Studd**, that remarkable man who was one of the 'Cambridge Seven' who went out as missionaries to China. Later by his bizarre behaviour he caused his missionary colleagues much pain and heartache: my uncle Albert William Davies was among them in the 'Heart of Africa' mission as it was then called. As far as I know, the full story of C T Studd - including some of the illnesses which led to his huge problems and failures as a

missionary - has not yet been comprehensively told. Some parts of the C T Studd myth survive, but the full truth is not generally known, and perhaps never will be told.

A Notable Welsh Leader of the eighteenth century

Consider the story of Howell Harris: some have called him the most remarkable man in the eighteenth century history of revivals. In Wales and in some circles in London (where he was close to George Whitfield and others) he had a very special place as a leader, although he was someone whom no bishop would ordain. His power and success seem to have been due to his gifts as an exhorter and as a brilliant organiser (of the Methodist Societies, as much as of the Community or 'the Family' in Trevecka and the Unit of soldiers he commanded in the time of the fears of a French invasion). He kept a journal, in which he recorded not only facts but also his secret dreams, desires and fantasies. Because of his unusual relationship with a significant woman in his life who was a kind of charismatic prophet, he became the subject of much rumour and speculation. This woman, Sidney Griffith, travelled with him and claimed gifts of prophecy: Harris called her his prophetic 'eye'. Only now are we beginning to understand more about him and his journal: a team at the University of Wales, Bangor headed by Dr Geraint Tudur has been funded to transcribe and edit the diaries - written in shorthand and all are in Harris's vile handwriting. The first volume of a study of Harris has appeared (***Howell Harris: from Conversion to Separation 1735-1750*** by Geraint Tudur, University of Wales Press, 2000) and we may surely expect enlightenment from further work by the same author and his team. Dr Tudur's considered judgment upon Harris at the end of this first volume is to say; '***Harris's enthusiasm was both his strength and his weakness; it made him a man of vision, but at the same time blinded him.... Enthusiasm proved to be both his making and his undoing***' (pp 233-234). For enthusiasm in its eighteenth century sense we may substitute the word 'charismatic' as it is used of church movements in our own time. We might apply it to later Christian leaders in our own time and in the nineteenth century also. The brief biography of Edward Irving was actually called ***Blinded Eagle***, doubtless because such a vision blinded him and many others, and the charismatic gifts both made him and undid him also.

The criticism that may be expected from non-Christians is often simply the result of scandal-mongering. That also happened in the case of John Wesley, and doubtless many others who are more interested in skeletons in the cupboard than in knowing what a man's life and his real achievement amount to: that after all would involve harder work and real assessment and appraisal. One Welsh poet responded to this kind of writing about personal failings by saying that, at times, the historian who did such hunting for scandal was not as accurate as a dramatist who was trying to present the story in a fictionalised form, and who sometimes seemed nearer the truth.

The Frankness of the Earl of Shaftesbury: Complete Exposure

As an example of someone who decided to go for total and complete exposure, I turn to the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury. His life of 85 years covered most of the nineteenth century, and his hard labours for over fifty of these years Lord Shaftesbury is one of the most enthralling and effective examples of an 'evangelical of evangelicals' as he called himself, working for social changes in his country. Children in factories and women and children in coalmines all benefited enormously from his work. So did those for whom he worked (for fifty years) as chairman of the commissioners in lunacy. His life gives the *lie direct* to those who say evangelicals do not have a social gospel, or are inactive in social change in the name of justice and duty.

It may be an amusing aside to remind you that he learned Welsh during a time spent in Aberystwyth with a friendly rector, and that he was elected both as Bard and Druid to the Welsh Gorsedd. Those who delight in blaming Rowan Williams for doing the same, did so

out of ignorance of what it was about - Shaftesbury would not have had anything to do with something if it went against his rigid principles, and being made a Druid had nothing to do with paganism, neo-paganism or New Age types of belief.

A number of books have been written about Shaftesbury in the last twenty years. But the important thing I wish to stress is that he gave his diaries and journals to a writer he trusted - for a three-volume life by Edwin Hodder. He wrote to Hodder: 'Above all things...try to do justice to those who laboured with me'. It is an important fact that Shaftesbury was, in the modern phrase, a team player. Of himself, he wrote shortly before he died: *'I should like the reality to be told, be it good, or be it bad, and not a sham'*.

Does a Biographer need specialist knowledge? : the case of Martin Luther

Recently we have had young Luther at The National Theatre, and old Luther in two television docudramas. Luther shows quite quickly the hazards of letting a doctor or a psychoanalyst loose in studying a great leader's life. The hazards of psychoanalysis in *Young Man Luther* (Erik Erikson) are clear - trying to explain Luther's early life in terms of a Freudian view of his father Hans. In many ways Erikson is one of the best writers of 'psychobiography', but I think his book - upon which John Osborne's play *Luther* was squarely based fails to understand what Luther's spiritual experience was about in any proper way. But still, as I have tried to show in a brief compass, his undoubted obsessional disorders and depression were important factors in his life. Gordon Rupp in his remarkable book *The Righteousness of God* showed me in the 1950s that the facts and the truth about Luther was more moving than any speculative account.

A Danish psychiatrist (Dr Paul Reiter) who wrote two volumes to prove Luther was an alcoholic who had presenile dementia was very wide of the mark and has been properly condemned by historians and theologians alike. Bainton's *Here I Stand*, Oberman's *Luther* and Alastair McGrath's studies are still the best introductions.

The value of biographers who have really studied his illnesses - kidney stones, renal failure and heart trouble - is another question: I think that they have filled the gaps in our knowledge, and showed the importance of prevalent physical illnesses in that age when so little could be done effectively to relieve and cure such diseases. I conclude that some experts may certainly have an important place in biography, but they are rightly distrusted if they wish to try and explain away, in terms of their own theories or pet notions, what are real achievements.

Do we need a new breed of biographer?

It has always been one of my main convictions that the glory of God's grace can be found in the transforming of the ordinary person into someone quite extraordinary. Just as the common people heard him gladly, when Jesus preached to them, so it seems to me that the mean things of this world - not those who naturally stand out - are often the ones who show heroic lives when transformed by grace. In that sense George Herbert's lines come true:

*'Nothing can be so mean
But with this tincture 'For Thy Sake'
Will not grow bright and clean.'*

Even at a secular level, where I believe God's common grace may be seen at work, we may be grateful for the ordinary blessings that may be given and received. I think Marianne Evans - in her youth such an ardent Calvinist - when she wrote as George Eliot, may have showed something she derived from her early faith in the character of Dorothea Ladislaw. It is worth recalling the words with which she ends the saga of *Middlemarch*

Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible...But the effects of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not as ill with you and

me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who have lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

Such words, to my mind, reflect the importance of the ordinary person who is a Christian: both because of the action of God's common grace and of his saving grace. We should try to remember the importance of those whose lives showed what has been described as 'pure religion, breathing household laws'.

John Bunyan and Professor Christopher Hill

Perhaps the best modern biography of Bunyan illustrates this: it may be an interesting fact that its author the late Christopher Hill has long been known not only as the Master of Balliol in Oxford but also as a leading Marxist historian (and quite possibly a Communist mole). In his writing about Bunyan, the title gives the game away: '***A Turbulent, Seditious and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church***'. It was from Hill that I learned that even the title of ***Pilgrim's Progress*** joined together two words used at the time in an unusual way. For '***pilgrim***' was used to describe the vagabonds who were odd-job men wandering as Bunyan and his father had done in search of a tinker's work. And '***progress***' was borrowed from the way a king or queen would make a 'royal progress' around England's palaces and great houses.

So the story of *Pilgrim's Progress* - which I think of as a readable version of his autobiography *Grace Abounding* (but with pictures!) - becomes in itself a subversive account by a dissenting Baptist, jailed for his preaching without a licence. And it describes those pilgrims who are, as Christians, part of 'a kingdom and priests to God'. Hill seems to me to show, as no one has done before or since with such power, how God takes ordinary persons and transforms them - in an extraordinary way - into His own people. That may not have been Professor Hill's intention, but I think it is a proper Christian perception of his work.

In the same way I believe that *Pilgrim's Progress* and many other writings of John Bunyan echo to the strains of the song of Mary, *The Magnificat*: '*He has put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away*'.

Is it wrong to hope that Christian writers with something of Hill's historical knowledge, power and imagination, but also with the same faith as John Bunyan, might write about him in such a way that it would reach a new generation with Bunyan's messages? I have seen some feeble attempts to do it, along the lines of comic books. I have listened to Ralph Vaughan Williams' musical treatment (now available on compact disc) and I remember seeing his opera version of *Pilgrim's Progress* at the Royal Opera House in London when it was first performed in 1951. Such presentations in comic or musical form, however good, only meet the needs of some children and few music lovers. I know that in the U S A someone was attempting a musical, doubtless along the lines of other Gospel musicals, but nothing seems to have come of it.

A Modest Proposal

A new kind of biographer needs to avoid, at all costs, the blind idolatry of the hero worshipper, resulting in a biography with no proper shape, no appropriate assessment and no real criticism of its subject. That becomes hagiography, not Christian biography. We do not want plaster saints but real people! We must go beyond any cult approach, of whatever kind.

Might I propose that those powerful Christian publishers of our day might get together in an attempt to encourage the writing of Christian biography? There may well be summer schools already existing, or 'virtual reality' Internet schools of Christian biography which I don't know about. But I do wish there were more visible and evident encouragement of new Christian writers of biography. I know that there are Christian Book Fairs, which must cost a great deal to run each year, and that travelling to them must take away from the profits of

publishing. I wish there were true lovers of the truth in Christian lives who would fund new projects to re-write the 'tombstone biographies' in a way that appeals to our present generation and meets its need to know its true heritage so that they can apply the principles learned in former days to our own troubled times. Each generation needs its own account of the great heroes, in my view, so that they can be seen and known by those writing (or using multi-media perhaps) in the idiom and manner of our own time. Is this an unrealistic hope?

Envoi

You will recall in the last chapter of the Bible how John is so overawed by an angel-messenger whom he falls down and worships: he is sharply told to get up, and to worship God alone. *'Then he said to me, "See that you do not do that. For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book. Worship God."'* (Rev 22:9). And, in the last analysis, any decent attempt at Christian biography has to go beyond any cult or party interest - beyond even simply hero-worship. For its aim must surely be so to paint the portrait to show the dark features as well as the light, the faults and foibles as much as the strengths and greatness of the subject being considered.

Those who read 'a good life' will surely feel the need and the duty to direct the praise to God for the life lived, and not only to praise the man or woman about whom they have been reading. It may be well to end by saying (again with John, in the first chapter of Revelation) *'to Him who loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever'* (Revelation 1: 5,6).

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