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MAURICE BARING

His Catholic characters play minor roles, yet his operatic friend Ethel Smyth found his novels full of theology.

In the National Portrait Gallery in London there is a painting by Sir Henry James Gunn featuring three Catholic authors, two seated at a table, the third standing slightly behind them. The massive caped figure on the left, engaged in sketching, is Gilbert Keith Chesterton. Looking on from the right, hands clasped, sits Hilaire Belloc. Even now, years after their deaths, they would be immediately recognized by many. But who is the tall bald figure, cigarette in hand, watching Chesterton sketch? His name is Maurice Baring.

It is a name one encounters in reading about others, as for example in the exchange of letters between Evelyn Waugh and Lady Diane Cooper, in lives of Belloc and Chesterton, Max Beerbohm, Ronald Knox, in accounts of the nineties, always it seems a background figure, in the picture, but standing, not seated, famous by association rather than achievement. This is not fair.

Nor would it be entirely true to say that he has been forgotten. Thirty years ago, Edmund Wilson wrote a testy essay called, "How Not to Be Bored by Maurice Baring." In 1968, Paul Horgan published a little pamphlet called *Maurice Baring Reconsidered* and followed it up in 1970 with a collection called *Maurice Baring Restored.* Horgan, a lifelong bachelor like Baring, predicted a Baring revival. It never happened. And yet, in Joseph Epstein's 1993 collection of essays, *Pertinent Players,* is to be found "Maurice Baring and the Good High Brow," a piece up to Epstein's high standard.

Maurice Baring was born in 1874 into an upper class family – his father was the first Lord Revelstoke –, attended Eton, which he loved, and went on to Cambridge, where he was marginally associated with the Apostles. (In an essay on Gilbert and Sullivan, he mentions attending a performance with Lytton Strachey.) His extraordinary capacity for languages led him into diplomacy. In preparation, he put in time at Oxford and then crammed in London for the examinations, which he passed only on the third attempt, largely because he was enjoying life in town.

His diplomatic career was brief, and was passed in Paris, Copenhagen, and then Rome. In 1904, he decided to devote himself full time to writing, something the family's affluence permitted. He went off to Russia as a war correspondent to cover the Russo-Japanese war, and fell in love with a country shrouded in mystery. He became fluent in the language and in a literature not yet appreciated in the West, and wrote of it, and translated it. The influence of Chekhov can be seen in Baring's totally natural style. In the first World War, he served in the air corps and was described as the best aide a general ever had. One could fill a book with tributes to Baring, as a friend, as a writer, as a diplomat, soldier, journalist, critic. He seems never to have made an enemy.

Baring was converted to Roman Catholicism in 1909, "the only action in my life which I am quite certain I never regretted." The description that fits him best is man of letters. He wrote some fifty books, verse, plays, essays, linguistic pastiches, anthologies, stories, novels. The three best novels, huge, are *C*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *The Coat without Seam*. "Reading Baring's novels," Epstein writes, "one sees the influence of the religious approach to life on literature, and discovers both its strengths and weaknesses." The novels tell of unhappy loves and convey the sense of the *lacrimae rerum*, that life is, in the end, "*almost* intolerable."

"The point of life is – I think – its imperfection. The point of human beings to me is that they are full of faults and weaknesses and wickedness – it is because of all that they are human . . ." Thus a character in *C*. And there is always the "unexpected

goodness, and unexpected badness." His Catholic characters play minor roles, yet his operatic friend Ethel Smyth found his novels full of theology. During his last year, Lady Diana Cooper wrote of a visit to him. "We both felt so gay, sipping sherry, and nibbling chocolate, and arguing about the Pope." She might be describing her exchanges with her much younger friend, Evelyn Waugh.

Baring's autobiography, *The Puppet Show of Memory*, as well as the odd title, can be found in used bookstores. He is a joy to read, but it must be said that he wrote of what was at hand, without apology, and with a graceful ease that keeps the pages turning. He flourished in a time when the entertainment to be found in books occupied a far larger portion of people's lives than it does today. Would his essays now be wasted on the desert air of a televised talk show? Baring himself saw how "what is called Education" was depriving the world of readers. Horgan spoke of a "small and active underground, so to speak, devoted to his work." And so it has remained.

From youth, he was given to triolets and later composed telegrams of them.

My lines do not scan
I most heartily grieve
Quite smooth once they ran
My lines do not scan
For the telegraph man
Refused to abrieve
My lines do not scan.

He also exchanged verse letters with his dear friend Belloc. Monsignor Ronald Knox was another friend and admirer. Epstein remarks on how unconcerned Baring seemed to be about the reception of his work, yet he expressed astonished delight when he was told of Franáois Mauriac's praise of his novels. He sang, he played the piano, he wrote, he read. He was a type already grown strange in his lifetime, and all but unimaginable now – a Henry

James character, a guest lolling in the library, without visible employment, always busy, yet somehow aimless.

Baring developed Parkinson's Disease in the 1930s and his last years were years of suffering. They were spent at his place in Rottingdean he called Halfway House. Laura Lovat's account of his final days ends thus:

> At a quarter to eleven Fr. McGuire lit the candles on each side of the Crucifix at the foot of his bed, and gave him Final Absolution, and we recited the Litany for the Dying.
>
> At eleven o'clock Maurice died.
>
> Fr. McGuire stood up and said the Magnificat.

It was December 14, 1945. He had ended his last book, *Have You Anything to Declare?*, with these lines:

> *Et à l'heure de ma mort soyez le refuge de mon âme étonnée et recevez-la dans le sein de votre miséricorde.*
>
> At the hour of my death be the refuge to my astonished soul and receive it in the bosom of your mercy.
>
> Amen.