

Hilaire Belloc The Sussex Laureate



Belloc's Mill, Shipley

Help yourself to this free booklet about Shipley's famous author, Hilaire Belloc. It has been produced for Horsham and District Year of Culture by Horsham Writers Circle. Or download it from our website:

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(Joseph) Hilaire Pierre René Belloc (1870 - 1953)

For much of the 20th Century - especially between the years 1910 and 1950 - Hilaire Belloc was one of Britain's most famous writers. He was a member of the 'big four' along with G K Chesterton, H G Wells and George Bernard Shaw. They were celebrity writers whose pronouncements, whether about world events, religion or politics were to be listened to. Their books were sold across the whole English-speaking world.

Although still known today in literary circles, especially around West Sussex, where he is celebrated locally, Belloc's writings, unlike those of the other three, are rarely seen in public libraries or bookshops and never in the recommended literature texts of the National Curriculum or the syllabuses of GCSE or A Levels.

Belloc relished argument and would delight in presenting controversial opinions that could infuriate both friend and foe alike (and he had many a foe!). Belloc's fame was such that he may have expected it to stand the test of time. In a poem published in 1925, for example, entitled *On His Books*, he says:

When I am dead, I hope it may be said:

'His sins were scarlet, But his books were read.'

He is modestly suggesting, with a typical epigrammatic flourish, that this as a 'hope'. But I suspect, in 1925, when the whole world seemed to be listening to him, that he imagined that people long into the future would be excited by his notoriety and aware of his popularity. I'm fairly sure, too, that he believed that many of his predictions about Western civilisation, religion, democracy and economics would be proved right. Indeed, as you read through this booklet, where I've attempted to summarise some of those views, you may see certain ideas that do, indeed, have resonance today.

Belloc was a prodigious writer. He wrote on a range of subjects and in a range of genres about religion, politics, economics, history, military tactics, food, drink, travel and, most importantly for us in our Horsham and District Year of Culture, his beloved Sussex. He was a novelist, biographer, satirist, war correspondent, editor, soldier, historian, journalist and a poet of some considerable ability (W H Auden went as far as to say 'as a writer of light verse, he has few equals and no superiors.') His first significant publication, for example, *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts* - and the books of 'Cautionary Tales' and 'Cautionary Verses', produced a few years later, have never been out of print, have recently been recorded by Stephen Fry, and had a great influence on Roald Dahl who claimed that he knew all of the tales by heart by the time he was ten. Belloc's poems about Sussex and his travel writings about the county have rightfully earned him the

nickname 'The Sussex Laureate'. If you are looking for writing that celebrates our countryside and which presents the culture and the delights of traditional life in Sussex in a lively, most readable, and often inspirational way, he is certainly one to whom you should turn.

Why is it, then, that this prolific writer of over 150 books, this intellectual heavyweight, this man who was right at the heart of the British literary and cultural scene, is largely forgotten these days? Only his verses for children have remained in print over the years. Perhaps it is that he wrote so much about the politics and events of the early 20th Century, about a class-bound society that no longer exists and about a world and its issues that seem dim and distant to most of us. Certainly, after the Second World War, his anti-semitic views (which he denied, but which we will come to later) had become unpalatable to the British and American public. But also, although there is a witty, often profound, voice in much of his prose writing, the depth of research is often lacking and neither the balance of argument or integrity of analysis stand up to close scrutiny. He churned many of his books out, even dictating some at speed - sometimes, apparently, not even checking drafts. He claimed that he needed to write so much to raise enough money to support his family.

Early years

Joseph Hilaire Pierre René Belloc was born on 27th July 1870, during a thunderstorm, in La Celle-Saint-Cloud in the western suburbs of Paris. He was the second child of Elizabeth (Bessie) Parkes (an English writer and women's rights activist) and Louis Belloc (a prosperous barrister who came from an artistic and literary French family).

When only a few weeks old, it is said, he, with his family, managed to escape on the very last train out of Paris before the famous Siege of Paris (this was the Franco-Prussian War). Upon returning after that relatively short war they found their house and belongings had been ransacked by Prussian soldiers. The place, its paintings (Hilaire's French grandfather had been a famous painter) and furniture had been trashed. Family portraits had moustaches drawn upon their faces. Perhaps it was talk of this experience by his family as he grew up that helped make Belloc resentful of Germany. For much of his life - he would refer to the Germans as 'Prussians'.

In 1872, when Belloc was only two years old, his father died. His mother brought him and his sister back to England. For a while they lived in London; the wealth that his mother had inherited made them comfortably enough off. However, soon most of it was lost. It appears that it had been entrusted to an incompetent stockbroker. Whatever the reason, the struggle for money was to be extremely significant for Belloc for much of his life and

made it necessary for him to publish as much as he did (only a very small number of his publications did he claim were any good!). The family were left in 'genteel poverty' and were obliged to move away to a less costly place than London.

They moved to Slindon.

Belloc loved his time here. Such was his attachment to the area that, after making his name in Oxford and London, he moved back and remained here for the rest of his life.

At the age of ten he was sent to The Oratory School in Birmingham. His mother had been converted to Catholicism in the latter part of the 19th Century, influenced, as so many were, by Cardinal Newman, the founder of the School. She became a friend of another inspirational Catholic leader, Cardinal Manning, who had links with the School too, was a prominent supporter of social reforms and the trade union movement, and was to be a very significant figure in Belloc's early years and life-long work promoting Roman Catholicism and championing social reform.

He seems to have enjoyed school life. However, at 17, and typically Belloc, he decided not to follow the sort of conventional career path that lay in front of him. He signed up to train for the French navy (he was still a French citizen). He had a love of sailing and the sea, something that remained with him, as we shall find out later. But the routines and discipline of the naval college he attended in France bored him and frustrated him. So he left and tried his hand at farming (as we know, he had already developed a deep love for the countryside around Slindon). Through his mother's influence, he got a job on the Duke of Norfolk's estate near Arundel. Perhaps training to be a land agent would satisfy him. Apparently it was not demanding enough. Either he grew bored or his managers saw no future in agriculture for him. He then took an apprenticeship as a draughtsman in an architect's office in Bloomsbury, but, though talented at drawing, his restless and adventurous spirit soon dragged him away from that.

It was really writing that attracted him. It always had been. The literary world was part of his background. His mother (who had written several books) had grown up in that world, and through her family was acquainted with George Eliot, Thackeray, Trollope and the Brownings. Some of his French relatives had been writers too. His sister (Marie Belloc-Lowndes) would go on to become an extremely successful novelist. So Belloc set his mind on becoming a writer.

Then something happened that was to change the course of his life. He fell in love. In 1890, an American family - a mother with her two daughters - was introduced to the family by Cardinal Manning. The daughters were invited to stay for a few weeks while the

mother returned to America. One of the two, a 22 year-old, named Elodie, became romantically involved with Hilaire. Elodie, however, was intent on becoming a nun. She returned to America - but she and Hilaire wrote letters to each other.

In 1891 Belloc travelled to America to see her and, so the story goes, after disembarking in New York, he set about crossing the continent, for Elodie lived in Napa, North California. With very little money he was obliged to walk a large part of the way making enough money to stay at lodgings by selling sketches and poems. He tried to gamble (unsuccessfully it would seem) in saloons. But his arrival and dishevelled appearance at Elodie's house some months later seems to have surprised the family - not least Elodie herself. And not in a good way. Sensing their disapproval, and with talk of Elodie taking holy orders, Belloc trudged his way back to England.

Upon his return he found himself receiving his call-up for his French national service (he was still a French citizen). He spent the next year as a soldier in the French artillery. The experience clearly was a significant one for him. It helped his French speaking ability, which was not very good at the time, although his use of military slang was to cause embarrassment later on in life when he used it inappropriately on some highly formal occasions. He experienced soldiering (which no doubt was to be helpful in some of his later writing - he wrote a number of books about famous military campaigns). And he made some useful contacts for his war reporting during the First World War. However, living with the French military of the time he also seems also to have gained or reinforced his own anti-Jewish sentiments. Anti-semitic views were rife in the French military and had been at the heart of the conviction of Alfred Dreyfus in 1894. Indeed, Belloc seems to have remained convinced of the guilt of Dreyfus for the rest of his life, rejecting the exposé of the French military and government by Victor Hugo in the famous newspaper article 'J'Accuse' in 1898 with its proof of Dreyfus' innocence.

Oxford University



Back in England the following year, and yet again with help from his mother's connections, Belloc was offered a place at Balliol College, Oxford. He still had to pass the exam, however. As a student he received financial support from his sister and her fiancé.

He soon fell completely and totally in love with Balliol College and the academic world of Oxford. His next three years there were perhaps the happiest three years of his life. Successful as a scholar (he was to emerge

with a first class degree in Modern History), particularly effective as a speaker (he became a star debating performer and President of the Oxford Union) and hugely popular and influential as a personality (he was four or five years older than most other students, and he'd seen the world (well, some of America, and lots of France, anyway) and he had served as a soldier. His love of the College is shown in the poem: *To the Balliol Men Still in Africa*:

*Balliol made me, Balliol fed me,
Whatever I had she gave me again;
And the best of Balliol loved and led me,
God be with you, Balliol men.*

He discovered friendships amongst these 'Balliol men' that would last a lifetime. His good humour, wit and enormous sense of fun made him an extremely popular figure. He loved the idea of challenging orthodoxy and constantly ridiculed the English aristocracy (many of whom were his friends). With some other friends he formed a group called the 'Republican Club'. A.N.Wilson in his book *Hilaire Belloc A Biography* points to this profile in the university newspaper 'Isis' which doesn't disguise its admiration for the 23 or 24 year-old Belloc:

"Joseph Hilaire Pierre Sébastien René Swanton Belloc - Catholic, artilleryman, journalist, draughtsman, poet, sailing master etc etc. and, if you meet him, you will learn that he likes women to stick to their petticoats and that he is not a teetotaller nor a friend to teetotallers."

You can see here the sort of impression he made in that somewhat rarified world. And you'll have noticed, too, the comment about petticoats. Despite his mother's writings in favour of female emancipation and women's rights - Belloc fiercely opposed votes for women.

He hoped to remain in Oxford and to live the life of an academic. So, upon graduation, he applied for the vacant Fellowship at All Souls College. He went to the interview apparently confident that he would obtain the post - his argumentative skills would enable him to sail through. He failed. He was devastated. Perhaps his bombastic manner had caused offence. One account of the interview suggests that he affronted his interviewers by placing a small statuette of the Virgin Mary on the table in front of him before starting. Both the Edwardian establishment and Oxbridge academics were seriously Anglican in those days. Whatever the cause of his rejection, Belloc was embittered by the experience. He became super critical of 'dons and such-like' throughout much of his future life.

He stayed on in Oxford, however, tutoring and giving extension lectures - involving himself with the university world, hoping for, but never being offered, any significant post.

Meanwhile, in America, Elodie had entered a convent with the intention of becoming a nun. But after only a few months she and her mother superior agreed that it was not going to be the life for her. She and Belloc had maintained contact by letter and so, in June 1896, Belloc returned to California to see her. The couple married.

With Elodie at his side Belloc came back to Oxford and threw himself into his writing. He had already had published a serious book of poetry: **Verses and Sonnets** (1895). He followed it up in 1896 with a very successful : **The Bad Child's Book of Beasts**. Belloc had a gift for writing children's poetry that spoofs and subverts prim and proper Victorian and Edwardian attitudes towards their children's upbringing. He continued with **More Beasts for Worse Children** (1897). Meanwhile he spent time researching one of his great enthusiasms - the French Revolution. His biography **Danton**, was published in 1899.

Hilaire and Elodie's first child, Louis, was born in 1897. He was to be followed by four others: Eleanor (1899), Elizabeth (1900), Hilary (1902) and Peter (1904).

London and Celebrity

By now Belloc was aware that there was no purpose to his remaining in Oxford, so the couple moved to London where they mixed in literary and journalistic circles. He was producing a steady stream of books and articles by now and becoming known. In 1900 he met G K Chesterton. The friendship between the two men continued throughout the rest of Chesterton's life (Chesterton died in 1936). They presented talks together, wrote together and championed their religious and political views together.

Also in 1900 he persuaded his publishers to support him in a remarkable and what turned out to be a very successful project - to write about a journey, a kind of pilgrimage, from where he did his military training in France to Rome. His powers of persuasion as he pitched this rather off-the-wall idea must have been considerable. The result - a very personal account of the journey - **The Path to Rome** - is full of delightful and often moving observations about the places where he stayed, the people he met, the buildings he passed, the art, and his own religious identity. Belloc's writing is at its most seductive here. It is conversational, full of digressions and personal opinions and very engaging. This is one of the most significant and successful pieces of writing he produced. The journey also may well have confirmed his commitment to Roman Catholicism - any

lingering doubts about his faith or his belief in the importance of Roman Catholicism to the culture of Europe, and therefore the whole western world, were removed.

In 1906, perhaps wanting to return to the beloved Sussex of his childhood, and probably because he was now confident enough with the contacts made and opportunities open to him in London, he, with Elodie and their five children, felt able to move away. He returned to West Sussex, purchasing five acres of land and a house, for £1000, in Shipley ('King's Land'). Belloc's Mill on the front cover of this booklet was part of this purchase. The mill is also known as Shipley Mill, or King's Mill and, in the past, Vincent's Mill. Belloc leased it to the miller who worked there and so it remained a working mill. Belloc's house at King's Land was to be his home until his death in 1953.

However, in the early years of the century he spent little time there. For in that very same year, helped by his formidable oratorical skills, he was elected as the Liberal MP for South Salford (having now become a naturalised British citizen). Although re-elected in the following General Election, he became more and more disenchanted with Parliament and party politics. It was an extremely disillusioned Belloc who finally left the House of Commons in 1910.

His book ***The Servile State*** (1912) presents Belloc's developing views on the parliamentary system. He found it inefficient. He complained of the tendency of the two main parties to develop and hold similar views. He argued that it inevitably lead to the creation of an oligarchy that would never properly represent the interests of ordinary people. Democracy, he came to believe, could only work in small communities or states. Later he came to admire leaders like Mussolini (who he met and who he believed had the vision to create a state that would genuinely serve the people) - but never Hitler or the Nazi approach to holding power. Paradoxically, for most of us, Belloc still valued the ideas behind the French Revolution even whilst proposing a return to monarchy. Later, along with G K Chesterton, he was to champion and write about 'Distributism' - a world-view that rejected both socialism and the capitalism of 'big-business'. Ideas behind the movement included workers having joint ownership of the companies they worked for; it extolled the value of home ownership for all, of individualism, of small businesses, and the development of unions into the kind of guild system seen in the middle ages.

In 1912 Belloc also published a remarkable piece of writing about Sussex that is still celebrated today - the novel ***The Four Men: A Farrago***. It is Belloc's homage to "this Eden which is Sussex still". The story has a mythical quality. It tells of four men (four aspects of Belloc's personality) as they journey from inn to inn across Sussex from East to West. It mixes poetry and local songs with some very lyrical prose and wonderful observation and, as well as being an allegory of life's journey perhaps, it presents

beautifully many of the best qualities of Belloc's writing. It also has a darker side - a sense of foreboding about the way the things most valued in the countryside and the rural way of life were being threatened and lost. A most worthwhile dramatisation of ***The Four Men*** was put on at the Capitol in Horsham in 2017. A YouTube version is still accessible on 'The Hilaire Belloc Blog - the official Blog of the Hilaire Belloc Society'. It is well worth seeing.

In 1914 Belloc's wife, Elodie, died, aged 46. The impact on Belloc was devastating. For the rest of his life Belloc wore black. He locked her room at King's Land and turned it into a kind of shrine. King's Land's writing paper and envelopes were from then on edged in black. Compounding this tragedy, in 1918, his eldest son, Louis, an airman, was reported missing in action. Weeks later, after the Armistice, the news finally came through that he had been killed.

However, early in 1914, Belloc had been given editorship of the magazine ***Land and Water*** - a publication with a large readership of over 100,000. During the war years that followed he went to France numerous times to write about the conflict. Despite cynicism about Britain's political and social systems, he believed the war must be won whatever the cost. To Belloc the fight was between Western civilisation with all its Catholic heritage and the forces of barbarism. The dark forces that had, for example, so disrespected his family home in La Celle-Saint-Cloud must not be allowed to prevail.

Throughout the 1920's and 1930's Belloc continued to write. There were major works presenting his religious views - ***Europe and the Faith*** (1920), ***The Jews*** (1922), ***The Mercy of Allah*** (also 1922) - for example. He foresaw great confrontations between these religions. Belloc has been accused of being antisemitic. I think the issue has understandably played a hugely significant part in harming his reputation. I also think that there is a good deal of evidence that he was indeed antisemitic - both in his writings and comments he made during speeches and recorded conversations. However, he always denied this and certainly spoke up against Nazi views.

As well as writing, Belloc went on lecture tours and took part in many debates - sometimes with Chesterton (on his side), and (against) Shaw and H G Wells.

He also continued to develop his love of sailing, most notably when he purchased a boat - 'The Nona'. In ***The Cruise of the Nona*** (1925) Belloc describes collecting this nine-ton cutter from Anglesea and sailing it down the coast all the way to Littlehampton. A bit like in ***The Path to Rome***, he recounts incidents on the journey. The tone is conversational. Digressing right, left and centre he talks of places and people and ideas. He reflects on his life, often profoundly and movingly.

Belloc, during these inter-war years, continued to lead a busy life. His lecture tours took him overseas, including to America - and he continued to produce books, many of which were simply dictated, and he wrote numerous articles for both newspapers and magazines for which he was very much in demand. You have only to go to the internet and look at the titles that he produced to see the range of topics that he wrote about. The quantity and variety suggest he possessed a remarkable drive.

BELLOC'S LEGACY AS A WRITER

How great a writer was Belloc? Many of those who knew him were certain that he was a genius. You may glimpse some of this in bits of his writing - but the conveyor belt of publications (and apart from his books there were hundreds upon hundreds of articles written) meant that the quality was diluted. But I'm certain, too, that if you had met him in his prime you would, like many of those he did meet, recognise him as a great man - witty, dynamic, full of enthusiasm, hugely intelligent. As I said at the start of this booklet little of what he wrote is easily available now. But if you want a glimpse of the effectiveness and liveliness of his writing just take a moment to read aloud this dramatic little poem that does find its way into poetry anthologies today. Written in 1929 it is called **Tarentella**. With its exotic setting, its exciting imagery, its insistent, hypnotic rhythm, its wonderful use of assonance, and its poignant final section, I think it demonstrates well Belloc's skill as a poet and it illustrates the remark from W H Auden that I quoted at the beginning of this booklet.

*Do you remember an Inn,
Miranda?
Do you remember an Inn?
And the bedding and the spreading
Of the straw for a bedding,
And the fleas that tease in the High Pyrenees,
And the wine that tasted of tar?
And the cheers and the jeers of the young muleteers
(Under the vine of the dark verandah)?
Do you remember an Inn, Miranda,
Do you remember an Inn?
And the cheers and the jeers of the young muleteers
Who hadn't got a penny,
And who weren't paying any,
And the hammer at the doors and the din?
And the Hip! Hop! Hap!
Of the clap
Of the hands to the twirl and the swirl
Of the girl gone chancing,
Glancing,*

*Dancing,
Backing and advancing,
Snapping of a clapper to the spin
Out and in --
And the Ting, Tong, Tang, of the Guitar.
Do you remember an Inn,
Miranda?
Do you remember an Inn?*

*Never more;
Miranda,
Never more.
Only the high peaks hoar:
And Aragon a torrent at the door.
No sound
In the walls of the Halls where falls
The tread
Of the feet of the dead to the ground
No sound:
But the boom
Of the far Waterfall like Doom*

Despite his popularity, his many friends and the support of his family, Belloc's last years appear to have been rather sad. His second son, Peter, died on active service with the Royal Marines in 1941. Belloc suffered a stroke in 1942 and although he recovered quite well, there is evidence of growing senility during the remaining 1940's and early 50's.

Hilaire Belloc died on July 12 1953, a few days before his 83 birthday. He collapsed onto the fire grate probably while trying to push a fallen coal or piece of wood back into the fireplace. Three days later, with many of his family and close friends at his bed-side, he passed away.

Where to find out more about Hilaire Belloc

The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (available to all library card holders) has a thoughtful article about his life by Bernard Bergonzi.

Wikipedia has a Belloc bibliography which shows, just looking at the titles, the huge range of major publications that he produced. The main *Wikipedia* article about him shows, under 'Works' the enormous number of magazine and periodical articles that he wrote.

Perhaps the most informative and most well-known biography of him is by A N Wilson - *Hilaire Belloc A Biography*.

Bryan Webster. Horsham Writers Circle.

If you pick up this booklet in time, you might like to come along to the talk from Kevin Newman on June 14th (see back page).

Eat, drink and find out more about this most famous Sussex writer.

Friday June 14th 6.00 - 8.00 p.m. at The Towers School, Upper Beeding.

Come along to a talk about this great champion of Sussex by the well-known local historian Kevin Newman and also enjoy some Sussex fare (so championed by Belloc) - of Sussex cheese, bread, bacon, wine, beer or soft drinks. Tickets - £5.00 (£3.00 children) - book at the School or email us at: writerscirclebookings@gmail.com



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