

Hilaire Belloc

(1870-1953)

Hilaire (Joseph Pierre) Belloc was born in France. He was a poet, historian and essayist and was among the most versatile English writers of the first quarter of the 20th century. Belloc was educated at the Oratory School, Birmingham, and then worked as a journalist. After nine months-military service as a French citizen, he entered Balliol College, Oxford in, 1894. He graduated with first-class honours in History. He became a naturalized British citizen in 1902 and from 1906 to 1910 was a member of the parliament. He was a close friend of Chesterton so Shaw coined the word "Chesterbelloc."

Belloc is most remembered for his light verse, particularly for children, and for the lucidity and easy grace of his essays; which could be delightfully about nothing or decisively about some of the key controversies of his times. As an essayist Belloc displays the same traits of the personal essayist as Lucas and Lynd. Under the lighthearted and playful treatment of a subject lie brilliant wisdom and seriousness. His major works include the novel **Mr. Burden** (1901) and the collection of essays, **On Nothing** (1908), **On Everything** (1909) and **On Anything** (1910); and the anthology of verses: **Verses and Sonnets** (1895) and **The Bad Child's Book of Beasts** (1896).

Belloc chose a variety of themes for his essays. He displayed an extraordinary whimsicality in the way he developed them into full-fledged compositions. It is a usual practice with essayists to

cultivate a novelty of approach towards their subject matter as well as the language. Like Lamb and Stevenson, Belloc too doesn't allow any scope to foresee the treatment of his subject matter. The element of novelty gives added interest to the essays. The whimsicality and un-predictability of his essays are governed by two factors (a) Aversion to subjective autobiographical references, and (b) Wide range of selection of topics for essays.

Often, two preoccupations unconsciously get into the texture of his essays namely, his journalistic approach and his historical consciousness. In his essays, it is often difficult to predict how a succeeding paragraph will provide a perspective as compared to the previous paragraph because there is a quick change of reference. This trait makes the reader feel the novelty and the reader cannot presume what is coming next. Even if the theme is understood by the title, Belloc takes care to see that the approach is novel, fresh and unpredictable. A number of his essays could easily be sighted for their humour, novelty and spirit of informality. The usual framework of his essays is an informal beginning, followed by candid remarks in the body, to be concluded in a sentimental vein. Such a pattern was established by Charles Lamb in several of his essays. His ability to think of a novel framework for an essay, the flexibility of his expression and variety of themes mark his prose writings. The bulk of his prose writings is descriptive, explanatory and polemic but rarely emotive. He was a man of rational outlook. He gave importance to the content and the orderly development of ideas without ambiguity. He chose words with care not for emotional suggestions but for clear expression of meaning. He, thus, appears to be a conscious craftsman. The style of his prose presents Belloc as a man healthy and normal in his responses to life with no frenzied effort to express any personal agony. His essays, in general, are interesting and meaningful. The following couplet sums up his art and popularity well—

"When I am dead it may be said:

His sins were scarlet but his books were read."

On Preserving English

INTRODUCTION:

The essay "On Preserving English" is a light hearted comment on a highly serious subject like the preservation of English language as a medium of human expression. Belloc feels great concern about the drifting tendency of the English people and warns the scholars of English against this mentality. He asks them to leave this policy of drift if they want to preserve the purity of their tongue. Belloc confidently speaks about the dangers against the preservation of English. According to him the first danger is a moral one which emanates from a sort of despair relating to the purity of English tongue. The second danger relates to the concentration upon mechanical details and setting up of pedantic rules which are false and useless. The third and the last danger to the English tongue is concerned with the verbal enemies. Use of foreign words, phrases, ambiguous expressions and the neglect of construction that result in lack of rhythm and proportion of the English tongue. Belloc argues that change may be the law of life, may be necessary for the growth, maturity and decay in the world of nature, but it is not applicable in the case of a language as it is liable to cause its decay. Mere formless change is not the law with regard to languages and those things which we cherish. Our attempt should be to arrest their decay when they reach maturity. Belloc cites the example of the two classical languages - Latin and Greek, and tells the English people that these two languages were able to keep their status in Europe because of the efforts of their scholars in maintaining their purity by standing against any formless change. If likewise, scholars of English languages too come forward and try to preserve English prose rhythms without neglecting its proportion in its construction, English will remain an important medium of human expression the world over.

Belloc argues that the preservation of English as an unrivalled language is not an easy task for it entails comparing English with other languages and estimating what it has accomplished. Unfortunately, according to Belloc, there has been a "policy of drift" in this matter. Next he proceeds to spell out the dangers against the preservation of English and lists them as; (a) moral, a sort of despair that the purity of English language cannot

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be preserved; (b) the concentration upon mechanical detail in the effort to preserve English: the setting up of pedantic little rules, most of which are false and all of which are unimportant; (c) the Verbal enemies: (1) introduction of foreign phrases and terms which are redundant; (ii) the fatal habit of loose wording, of ambiguity, of suspension—that is, using words which are of their nature relative to some end as though they were absolute; of emptiness—that is, using words with the sense washed out of them; and finally, (iii) the neglect of construction so that prose lacks rhythm and proportion.

This essay reveals Belloc's ability to discuss a serious subject in a light playful manner. It is not so much wit as wisdom which is the staple of this essay and as one reads the essay carefully one finds that rhythmic flow and proportion, the need of which Belloc bemoans in the final paragraph of the essay. The prose is not only argumentative but reflective as well, and from time to time it gets lit with brilliant flashes of humour.