

Grey Eminence

A.Huxley

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The Thirty Years War was a horrible war. All wars are admittedly horrible, but some are definitely more horrible than others. The devastation which was brought about by the extended warfare between 1618 and 1648 was only to be rivaled in the 20th century. The population of the German lands was not only decimated, but cut down in half. Of course horror was not evenly spread out, the armies of the day were not big enough to systematically lay waste everything in sight, so among the horrors there were islands of peace and tranquility nestled inside the randomly occurring interstices, but those were exceptions not really modifying the general picture only completing it. Those atrocities were of course witnessed and reported on. Grimmelhausens *Simplicissimus*, being the mots well-known literary example. But they were also graphically put down by Jacques Callot in his *Miseres et Malheurs de la Guerre*. Huxley compares it to the works by Goya on war, which are of course artistically far superior, but this does not mean that Callot is not able to convey the ordeals. Indeed he does it very convincingly. Those 18 etchings have been seen as the first explicit anti-war campaign in Western History. The most famous one in the series depicts a hanging. Twenty or so bodies being suspended from the limbs of a large tree, as so much over-sized fruit. Who were responsible for this human catastrophe?

Of course blame has to be spread out, it was the work of no single individual, and would not have persisted unless collectively pursued. There was something in it for almost everyone of an unscrupulous bent, and many an individual profited from it, if mostly through plunder. But of course some people were more responsible than others, being in positions to act and direct events, rather than having to react against them. One such person was of course Richelieu, known as the Red Eminence, due to the color of his Cardinal robe. Richelieu had the vision, as well as the withal, and he did profit nicely from it. In fact as Huxley remarks, the income he derived from the French State was in fact much more than the subsidies they paid to the Swedes¹. But in addition to a Red Eminence there was also a Grey one, who is not so generally known². This was Father Joseph, the Capuchin friar, whose 'real' name was François Leclerc du Tremblay, of impeccable French nobility and with royal connections. He was a man of spartan habits, devoted to the religious life, and an accomplished mystic, taking great pride in asceticism. What was it in for him? In the case of Richelieu there was worldly acquisition, but such temptations were beyond the notice of the friar, so what could have induced him? This is the great mystery which the

¹ According to Huxley, Richelieu awarded himself an annual salary of some four to five million livres, while the Swedes had to be satisfied with half a million. This strikes me as not only remarkable, but on the verge of being unbelievable. Sweden was a poor country, and it very much depended on French subsidies to keep on fighting. Thus one suspects that French money provided the lions share of its incomes.

² To the general reader he may be so obscure as to provoke a suspicion that he is simply invented by the author, but that is not true. As Huxley remarks. real life is stranger than fiction.

author sets out to solve, or at least illuminate, without ever really succeeding.

The first question that confronts a student of the period, is why Richelieu, a Catholic in charge of a Catholic country (admittedly recently emerging from a Civil War with its Huguenot minority) would ally itself with the Protestants. The classical explanation is one of power politics. The Habsburg dynasty was becoming too powerful as the Austrian and Spanish empires were being united, threatening to enclose and isolate France. So Richelieu supported the Swedish King, although not excessively as we have already remarked, and was happy with his initial success, and as happy, if not happier, with his demise at Lützen, as the Lion from the North threatened to become too big for his breeches, maybe even overrunning the Austrian empire. The cynical view of a Richelieu based on calculations of power is thus not too difficult to comprehend. In fact, with a man so fixed on a single purpose - the glory of France; personal morality becomes subservient to goals transcending the individual. As Huxley puts it. Richelieu was willing to go to hell for the sake of a greater good. But how to make sense of the case of the Friar? Huxley provides two complementary explanations, one explicit one merely implied. As to the explicit, he mentions Father Josephs desire for a general Christian crusade against the infidels. Fusing with his purely religious motivation was also a patriotic one. Clearly France should be the leading power of such a crusade, hence his desire to quench the power of the Habsburgs. The implied and subtler explanation is that the Friar was a divided personality. On one hand we had Ezechiely, the man of religion and mysticism; on the other the worldly Tenebroso-Cavernoso, with his penchant for intrigue and political action. Both sides of his personality needed an outlet, and the conflict of interests needed a rational justification, of which a man is usually quite adept at providing. Father Joseph being no exception. So thus this strange union of two men who appeared so very different, and of course were so in many ways, and for that very reason needed each other. Most likely Richelieu more than the Friar. Richelieu was of course no weakling, with a steady will, yet a man of the world cannot muster quite as much sustained will-power than a religious man, especially if the latter is somewhat of a fanatic. To the mystic, will is impersonal, and flows through him as a manifestation of a higher being. Thus when Richelieu at times wavered, Joseph was there to steady him in his quest.

So well did the friar perform his double duty. On one hand never neglecting to advise the sisters of the convents he supervised; on the other proving to be a perfect diplomat, as well as police officer keeping a network of spies keeping him informed. It is not surprising that in spite of his piety, at which he worked hard and incessantly, he became one of the most hated men. His energy is in retrospect amazing, keeping a strict regiment, getting up early each morning to do hours of meditation and prayer. In the end he must have over-exhausted himself, and did expire before his mentor, whom he was expected to succeed.

What was the legacy of Richelieu? Huxley takes a grim view. France overstretched herself and the eventual debacle of Napoleon made for the rise of Prussia, and hence, according to Huxley, the disasters of the 20th century, which he thus sees as a direct continuation of the Thirty Years War. The ultimate actions of politicians can never be predicted by themselves. Posterity has of course the huge advantage of hindsight. But what does it really mean? That we should absolve Richelieu from responsibility for developments that occurred long after his death? This seems a very reasonable thing to do, and hardly

worth mentioning. Is Huxley serious when it comes to drawing such long chains of historical causations? Or is he simply being lured by the temptation to impose on history patterns and inescapable chains of cause and effect? For an intellectual such temptations often turn out to be irresistible,

The book as a work of art is a failure. Seldom have I read a book that has put up such resistance to being read. Why is that? Huxley usually writes vividly and with verve. Could it simply be that he took his assignment far too seriously? Instead of letting his imagination loose, he put it into a cage, lest it would run away with him. So what we have is a work marked by constipation. Not very much is said after all, on the other hand what is said is said so repeatedly. The whole book is like a preamble to a real one, around which he moves in a circle, never really getting the courage, or the impetus to embark on. The Grey Eminence of the title simply refuses to come out of the shadow and be a character of flesh and blood. Some sympathy is at long last engendered for the him, when he at the very end suffers a stroke and lingers on for a few days, only to be struck again, and then finally. A book in which the prime character fails to engage you is bound never to take off ground. What a relief it was when it was finished,

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