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Baring's collapse

by [Ben Downing](#)

On *Maurice Baring: Letters*, edited by Jocelyn Hillgarth & Julian Jeffs.

Jocelyn Hillgarth & Julian Jeffs, editors

Maurice Baring: Letters.

Michael Russell, 160 pages, £15.95

What is one to do with them, the Maurice Barings of this world, the faded belletrists of yesteryear and B-list men of letters? Quaint, dated, incontestably minor, they are beyond the point of revival by even the most determined champions—not that such crusaders often sally forth in their defense. In Baring's case, one quixotic scholar did venture to predict (and to promote with a selection of his work) a “general restoration” of his status; that was in 1970, and almost forty years later we continue to await his second coming. Baring produced a groaning shelf's worth of books but not one standout. Where, say, an Edmund Gosse will be sheltered from oblivion by means of a single masterpiece—*Father and Son*, in his instance—Baring would seem to be doomed.

And yet, for all that, I do think the man worthy of consideration. Not necessarily as a writer per se; though I confess to having sampled only a handful of his fifty-odd books, I'm prepared to assert that you can consider yourself a well-read person without having cracked the spine of a Baring volume. He warrants our attention, rather, as an emblematic figure in the landscape of the past. An exemplar of both a certain kind of Englishness and of the lost, high, unified culture of the Continent, Baring is like a great auk or dodo, sadly but unsurprisingly extinct. So much so, in fact, that even the handful of memoirs and biographies on him are now elusive—I chased these phantoms through several libraries (where they always seem to have gone MIA) before giving up. Some sense of him can, however, be divined simply from his letters, a selection of which has at long last been published. Reading these delightfully offhand letters, written to everyone from Edward Marsh to André Maurois, one begins to see why Baring was such a beloved, respected, and well-connected fellow, one of those cosmopolitan and gregarious types who, while perhaps not exactly important, serves as a benign, integrating node to the civilization of their age.

In their preface, the editors immediately concede the diminished stature of their subject: “Maurice Baring is not the force he was. The story is told of someone who went into a Charing Cross bookshop and asked ‘Have you any Maurice Barings?’ The reply was ‘This is a bookshop, sir, not a garage.’” They go on, however, to make a persuasive case for him, if only on the grounds of his eclecticism, and to provide us with a sketch of his career, along with a chronology. Briefly, the picture that emerges is as follows. Baring was born in 1874 into a family best known for its bank (brought down in 1995 by the rogue trader Nick Leeson). He served for a few years in the Foreign Office but found it uncongenial. After quitting, he wrote more or less full-time for the rest of his life, turning out books of poetry, light humor, and travel; some war reporting; plays and theater criticism;

and, later on, a number of novels. All the while he traveled incessantly: to France and Denmark for the diplomatic service, to Manchuria and Constantinople for *The Morning Post*, and throughout Russia on his own account. That last country became something of a specialty, and no one less than Sir Bernard Pares (one of the foremost Russia experts of his day) declared that Baring had “a more acute understanding of Russian nature and character than any foreigner I have known.” In 1909 he converted to Catholicism and thereafter was often associated with Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton, the three men constituting, to the public mind, a tight triumvirate of literary Catholics. Without ever having married or reproduced (whether he was closet-gay or asexual is hard to tell), he died in 1945.

Though he only hit his stride as a writer in later years, Baring’s early letters are perhaps his most colorful, particularly the ones written from turn-of-the-century Paris. Baring bit into the upper-crust social life with all the relish and confidence (his French was superb) of Henry James. With astonishing quickness he penetrated that ultimate citadel of snobbery, the Faubourg Saint-Germain, and was taken up by such grandees as the Countess Greffuhle, the model for Proust’s Duchesse de Guermantes. Another illustrious new friend was Sarah Bernhardt, as he writes to Gosse:

I have nothing much to tell you except that I made the acquaintance of Sarah B... . I sent her printed *à un exemplaire* the little masterpiece of Victor Hugo she recited at the concert in aid of the British wounded; she professed herself highly touched; we sobbed in each other’s arms in her sitting room at the theatre which is like the white satin railway carriage in which Queen Victoria travels.

In his autobiography *The Puppet Show of Memory*, Baring remarks of Dreyfus-obsessed Paris that “literature was rarely discussed anywhere in those days, *l’affaire* dominated everything and excluded all other topics,” and that “a foreigner felt uncomfortable in circles where the Dreyfus case was being discussed—it was too much of a family affair.” And yet, on the evidence of his letters, he sometimes felt perfectly at ease:

The dinners were very amusing. I never heard so much *relevage* in my life. We discussed Wagner and whether the greatest art required people to be educated in order to appreciate it, at the top of our voices, and I suddenly became conscious I was insulting an academician. The next night the officer and an ex-officer came to dinner, and M. de Ganay and M. [Jean] Scumberger, and they welcomed the opportunity to talk about the Affaire which they had been longing to do, and so we plunged once more into that luring whirlpool, and I came out an uncompromising anti-Dreyfusard, which I have long suspected I was. The next night we discussed Napoleon’s character till we were hoarse.

Nor was literature entirely swept aside, as another letter shows:

Yesterday morning I went to see Anatole France again in his high medieval cell. Jaurès ... was there, talking with rich flow of language and a Gascon accent, and in the corner observing the cobwebs was M. Emile Zola. Anatole France didn’t like *L’Aiglon* [Rostand’s play, starring Bernhardt]. Unfortunately it has been made a political question and as the Anti-Dreyfusards have adopted it, the Dreyfusards feel obliged ... to say that it is worthless. Suddenly, however, he put Aeschylus on the block and talked for half an hour in the most brilliant and subtle way about this author, who is happily out of reach of the Dreyfus affair.

You may have gotten the impression from such letters that Baring was a mere bounder, butterfly, and name-dropper, but in fact he was nothing of the sort. After his transfer to Copenhagen in 1900, he seems a bit relieved at the dropping away of glitter and glamour: “*les moeurs danoises* are very simple; the King of Denmark meets one at the station and carries your luggage on his back to the

hotel.” To be sure, he never lost his taste for the *gratin*, or for frivolity, as the opening lines of a letter from Russia make clear: “You wish to know the truth of the mad dog incident. You shall. It was like this. Countess Boborinsky’s small white Chinese dog was violated by an enormous mastiff... .” But beneath his playful manner he was serious, reflective, and committed, both in thought and in deed. One might not expect a polyglot nomad prone to weeping over Victor Hugo to be much of a patriot, yet Baring remained staunchly British to the end. Even while caught up in the Paris whirl he’d been riveted by Ladysmith and other Boer War debacles, as a letter to Gosse shows: “Yes, it has been a melancholy xmas but never have I been so proud of my country. Disasters and calamities which would have thrown France into revolution, Germany into Socialism, Russia into bankruptcy, merely brace the nerves of England and tighten its muscles.” During World War I he was such an outstanding ADC to General Trenchard of the Royal Flying Corps that, on Baring’s death almost thirty years later, Lord Trenchard was moved to write a letter of appreciation to *The Times*, reprinted here as an appendix. Light-hearted and forgiving in peacetime, in war he held both himself and others to tougher standards. One of his most startling letters, written to Chesterton in 1915, forcefully argues that Frank Harris, who’d been writing pro-German articles from New York, had been treated far too leniently by fellow authors such as Arnold Bennett, and that he in fact “deserves a traitor’s death.”

The worldly Baring was, however, far from blind to the British propensity for smug, sometimes ignorant xenophobia. Writing to Gosse in 1905, he laments the insular pomposity of their common friend A. C. Benson, whose recent book of poems included

an Ode to Japan in which he pats them on the back (as if all these thousands of years they had only been dolls!) and he says in a stanza which made me rock with laughter: ‘From us you shall acquire / Stern labour, sterner truth.’ ... I have told him that to tell the Japanese they will acquire stern labour from us is as if he were to tell Cicero he would acquire the art of writing Latin prose from a 4th form boy at Eton. Good gracious! Labour from us! The Japs of all people, who put the bees and the ants to shame by their unremitting sedulous patient toil and love of toil. And this advice coming from Eton, that citadel of sloth and silly toil.

In the same letter, Baring also mocks Benson’s proposal that the Japanese learn from the British “that strong faith we reckon ours,” which Baring takes for “a suggestion ... that they should become Church of England.” He seems to have found any sort of proselytizing distasteful, and his own conversion, though fostered by Belloc (“but for you,” Baring once wrote him, “I should never have come into the Church”), was an intensely personal matter and no quick decision; we can, in fact, watch him vacillate in his letters, as in this one from 1902: “I have gone back to my old idea, that one must be born a R.C. to be one.” Even once he did become Catholic, he had none of the typical convert’s zeal to sweep others into the fold; to Belloc he wrote, “Take my advice. Never never never talk theology or discuss the Church with those outside of it. It is not a subject which can be discussed from the outside.” The suspicions and misunderstandings of non-Catholics both annoyed and (to a lesser degree) amused him. Nettled by H. G. Wells’s *The Passionate Friends*, Baring politely remonstrated with him: “The true conception of Catholicism is something foreign to the English. The Protestant clergy talk as if Rome were a lapsed Protestant sect and are constantly attacking it for being false to doctrines that were never hers.” Several years later, he aired a similar grievance in a letter to Ethel Smyth:

It has always struck me, and did strike me before I was a Catholic, that the ideas non-Catholics have about the relations of Catholics to the priesthood are fantastic. When I was twenty I remember hearing a conversion (that of a young man) discussed at a dinner. The following conversation took place:

- A. ‘Young so and so has become an R.C.’
- B. ‘What made him do that?’
- A. ‘Got hold of by the priests.’
- B. (Satisfied) ‘Of course. Got hold of by the priests.’

Irked and slightly bitter though this letter may be, it also displays the irrepressible comic touch that was distinctly Baring’s, and that makes his correspondence often a joy to read. No mass conversion to Baring-worship seems to be in the offing, nor even that aforementioned “general restoration”—we’re likelier to see the Stuarts back on the English throne than a complete set of Baring available at Barnes & Noble. But it’s good to have one small and telling part of him, a bit of his still-unfossilized remains, finally at hand.

Ben Downing is the author of *Calligraphy Shop* (Zoo Press), a book of poems.

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