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Both Sides of the Circle: Autobiography

Christmas Humphreys

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Christmas Humphreys : Both Sides of the Circle: Autobiography before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Both Sides of the Circle: Autobiography:

12 of 12 people found the following review helpful. Eccentrically told, but what else would you expect?By John L MurphyFamed London barrister and Buddhist popularizer, his 1978 autobiography reads as quaintly as his Edwardian verse that he preferred and imitated. Perhaps more of a curio than a solid look at what made him so determinedly countercultural well before the hippie era, nonetheless I found it instructive in an appealing musty, eccentric, and burnished manner. As you might expect, he unfolds his story erratically but in a rather calculated way to express himself as a clearly inspired sort of "character."Certainly his life, spanning the century, epitomizes a kind of restless upbringing that marked many of his generation. Born in 1901, his brother's death in the Great War marked him early to turn from verities to searching, and soon he found Theosophy. Curiously, he never abandoned its tenets even as he soon practiced Buddhism, and this makes for an odd pair, for as an articulate, passionate humanist, his hankering for the transports of Blavatsky and her circle appears to be at cross purposes with dharma as Humphreys expounds it. Yet, after the trauma of WWI as he witnessed it as a student at a distance, he sought when up at Cambridge (just missing the war due to his age), solace for his nagging "What's it all 'about'?"He soon became by the mid-1920s a spokesman for Buddhism. The sense of "unborn, unoriginated, unformed" fascinated him, along with its sense of justice along a "Middle Way." With his wife, he tirelessly devoted his time to the Buddhist Society as a co-founder (see my review of his summation, "Sixty Years of Buddhism in Britain), when not prosecuting and defending at the Bar. He tells of how he sought to be scrupulously fair to those he represented or challenged in court, and how their karma, and his, made

him take very seriously his role as their advocate or adjudicator. Given my interest in Irish republicanism, I would have liked more on the case tried by his father of one accused of arson: "Mason," the "C.O. of the I.R.A. in Great Britain," but understandably he gives more time to his role in the postwar Japanese war crime trials, that of spy Klaus Fuchs, Ruth Ellis who killed her lover, and other spectacular cases for his British readership. He tells skillfully of his role as "Senior Prosecuting Counsel" and how he took his appointment, handling murder cases often as not, with the utmost sense of compassion mixed with justice. His words on "crimes of passion" merit meditation by many bent on "lock 'em up and throw away the key" today. "I repeat, there are worse crimes than the majority of the murders which for many years I put before a jury for trial." (170) He journeyed to Asia, and offers a fine account of meeting D.T. Suzuki the Zen scholar, Humphreys asks him: "You mean that all is God but there is no God?" Suzuki responds: "I mean that all is God and there is no God." After that exchange, Humphreys "took a long step forward on my way to Zen." (129) He relates how the Buddha and oneself are not 'two' identical things but two 'identical' things." The difference is in the inflection. He also sought to make Buddhism more relevant to the problems of the postwar world. He and his wife "Puck," of whom he writes touchingly, traveled widely to connect Western practitioners with Eastern experts at a time before the Tibetan diaspora spread teachings globally. Appended to his book's his "Twelve Principles of Buddhism," which he sought to promote as a sort of ecumenical common ground for all sects of the dharma. As an early confidant of the present and then young Dalai Lama, he assisted the first waves of refugees via the Tibet Society. He finds in 1956 the Dalai Lama's speech to a conference about a prophecy than spoken of in Tibet would come true soon: "that in the course of time the Dharma would move from Tibet to the land of the 'pink skinned' people." (195) Humphreys concludes his tale still involved in this work among the 'pink skinned' people himself, as one of the earliest expounders of Buddhism in Britain. He urges us to find the moral ambition and common wisdom within all religions, and not to ignore in teaching the young "the Light which gave them birth." (252) He ends by elucidating the title of his story: "every pair of opposites is more than the two sides of a coin. It is, and never ceases to be the One from which both came. This Oneness is the Centre which, 'abiding nowhere', is each point of the circumference. Here is mystery, in a world of intuitive awareness to which, one day, knowingly, we shall arrive, At least, as we grasp both sides of the circle we shall be moving towards its centre, the Self within, which will be found to be at the same time light and life and love." (156-7) This passage transmits some of the tone of this book. It may be too ethereal for some, too sentimental for others. But within, you get the sense of a sincere man who devoted his long life to bettering the condition of others, in body and soul, incarcerated or on the outside, who sought to solve some of the mysteries of our freedom and what we do with such a human condition in a world full of pain.