

***WEE* ON THE DRY SIDE 400**

Colebatch's 'Return of the Heroes'

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Events in the Middle East should by now have reminded us of Edmund Burke's injunction that "All that is necessary for evil to triumph, is that good men do nothing". However, for it to mean anything useful to us we must first be in possession of relatively clear ideas of good and evil.

The values that separate good from evil, in Western societies at least, are not determined for us by ideology, nor are they determined by temporary rulers. Since our churches largely abandoned moral instruction and our universities affected a preference for nihilism, the values are, instead, learned, almost solely, at our mothers' knees and in similarly informal and untutored ways. They, nevertheless, remain the bases of our highly-successful, Judeo/Christian, Western culture.

Since the Second World War these values have been under constant attack from many of our most honoured (and subsidised) artists, thinkers and teachers---from people who work with ideas. Yet in the breasts of ordinary men and women, and boys and girls, notions of honour, chivalry, duty, fortitude, mercy, generosity, courage and nobility are very much alive.

Hal Colebatch (who is, among other things, one of Australia's better contemporary poets) uses two immensely popular modern epics, 'The Lord of the Rings' and 'Star Wars', to make this point. ('Return of the Heroes', Critical Issues 13, published by AIPP.) Both of these best-selling fantasies tell the story of the gradual ennoblement in the face of crisis of ordinary individuals, qua individuals. Both tales, along with their authors, have been roundly condemned by left-leaning members of a chattering class because assertions of personal responsibility strike at the heart of all coercive utopian ideals including fascism, socialism and communism.

At one point Colebatch quotes an earlier influential socialist literary critic, one Alfred Orage, who stated: "The literature which we despise is associated with the economics we hate". But those who detest these two works are divided by much more than economics from the people who admire the stories; just as much more than economics divides people who appreciate Prime

Minister Hawke's decision to send Australian warships to the Persian Gulf from critics of his decision. (I leave aside experts in the field who have made technical or tactical criticisms.)

The lines that separate critics from admirers of the epics, and opponents from supporters of our lending assistance in the stand against Saddam Hussein, are roughly coincident. These lines follow the collectivism-versus-individualism, socialism-versus-capitalism, left-versus-right lines with which we are so familiar. The coincidence is not a chance one, but is determined by differing beliefs about what man is. It is the line that ultimately determines the type of society we would wish to form--a society built on power or a society founded on freedom.

Deny man self-determination; see him as no more than flesh and blood; accept that man is only 'what he eats'; and then individualism and the democratic-capitalist social order make little sense. Without an individual capacity to distinguish good from evil and to make conscious choices between the two, we might as well become complete hedonists and/or accept that forces beyond our control have committed us, like ants, wholly to the collective.

For want of choice, we must then, like the Communists of theory, accept the forces of history, or, like real-life Communists accept the authority of the current power-holding elite. Without the ability to distinguish good from evil, then who would we be to say that one social order is better than another, or that some Comrade, Fuhrer or Ayatollah had not, in fact, discovered the true way.

If, on the other hand, right and wrong are knowable to everyone and man really has a large measure of free will, then tomorrow belongs automatically to no one and a social order that upholds freedom does make sense. So do the cultural traits that allow freely-choosing individuals to live in tolerable peace one with another. And so do families that give moral instruction. This debate has, however, been more successfully---certainly more influentially---conducted at the level of art than of social science. Hence the importance of 'Lord of the Rings' and 'Star Wars'. And hence the wrath of the collectivists---the values inherent in these stories undermine collectivists' authority.

The wrath of pacificists directed towards the two stories is perhaps explained by the fact that in both tales people are forced into positions where the only defence is some form of attack. But in neither story is it nationalistic paranoia---my country right or wrong---that causes the fictional heroes to take up arms. Ultimately they do not die for national honour but to preserve freedom for future generations. Thus Chauvinism has no place---neither Tolkien nor Lucas has a place for even the equivalent of a parliament house dominated by a huge national flag or for the equivalent of Australia's one-eyed unchivalrous sports commentators.

Freedom, not war, is glorified by the stories. Duty, in a Nelsonian sense, along with other traditional Western values, is central to both plots. So is a type of Burkean conservative caution that recognises that sometimes it is dangerous not to make a stand against evil.

What then is the relevance of 'Lord of the Rings' and 'Star Wars' for Australia's response to a dictator who will use poison gas even on his own Kurdish population and who has most recently annexed a neighbouring state? None that is direct and certainly not an unrealistic romantic belief that good guys always win. But the immense popularity of these stories is evidence, should the Prime Minister require it, that Western chivalrous values are alive in Australia. It is evidence that, in spite of the hard work of those throw-backs to the Middle Ages who value power over freedom, most Australians will, when asked, help to defend freedom. Run-of-the-mill Australians will still help to maintain the sorts of societies that, among other things, allow the unrepresentative few, such as the Left of the Labor Party and Green Senators, to protest that their Prime Minister is wrong.

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