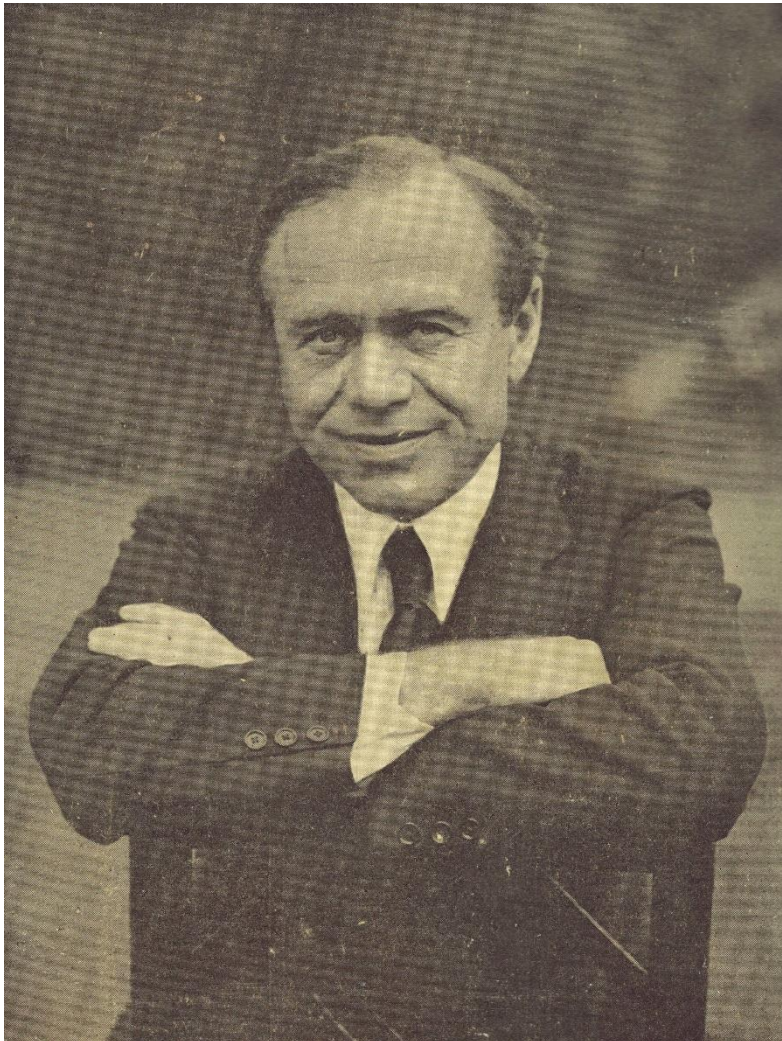


JONATHAN AITKEN SPEECH



**THE INAUGURAL BEAVERBROOK FORUM
ON WEDNESDAY 14 MAY 2025**

"MY GREAT UNCLE MAX"

My Great Uncle Max

By Revd Jonathan Aitken for the Beaverbrook Forum Final 14 May 2025

My Great Uncle, Max, the 1st Lord Beaverbrook, if he could look down this evening, from what I hope is his celestial perch, would surely be delighted to see so many of his own eclectic tastes, in people, causes, and kindred spirits in his favourite hobby of "mischief-making" well reflected in the assembled company. Thank you all for coming here tonight.

For Beaverbrook was a character with a Capital 'C'. A one-off original.

He did not fit into Britain's pigeonholes of class, political allegiance or career patterns.

He was a hyper-energetic Canadian maverick. Easily bored but easily excited by small and great scenes in the passion play of public life.

That, for him, meant, mainly Newspaper ownership, Business deals and politics which with his gift for a vivid phrase he described in his most renowned book *"Men and Power 1917-1918"* as:

"The endless adventures of ruling men."

Beaverbrook's dinner parties (and I was lucky enough as a student to be invited to several of them) were often theatrical events.

The cast or guestlist was packed with colourful rising or occasionally fallen stars.

There were Young-comers from Westminster and Fleet Street; There were beautiful and outspoken women, elder statesmen from the Cabinets in which Beaverbrook served. There were celebrities and even one or two notorieties who had appeared in the William Hickey gossip column of the *Daily Express*.

There were “Bollinger Bolsheviks” as he called the Left-wing firebrands such as Michael Foot, Nye Bevan, Jennie Lee, Barbara Castle and Dick Crossman who relished their host’s Princely hospitality and also his mischievous habit of stirring up rows.

In one of my books, I give my eyewitness account of a row in which Hugh Cudlipp, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Daily Mirror*, clashed so vigorously with Randolph Churchill (this Randolph’s Grandfather) that Randolph stormed out of the dining room hurling his napkin, a side plate and multiple insults at Cudlipp.

Par for the course for a Beaverbrook dinner at Cherkley – his country house. After this trailer, let’s tackle two questions:

So who was the Lord Beaverbrook whose memory we honour tonight?
And why should we be thinking about him 61 years after his death?

Asking the first question I have just posed, in the 1960s, would be the equivalent of asking now: Who is Rupert Murdoch? Interesting though Murdoch is, Beaverbrook was more intriguing because his life and achievements were spread across a far wider, and more colourful historic canvas.

So in the next 25 minutes let me take you on a fast canter through the Beaverbrook story, before handing over to Randolph Churchill who will give his insights into the Churchill-Beaverbrook friendship.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Never forget that Beaverbrook was a son of the Manse. His father The Revd William Cuthbert Aitken was an Edinburgh University educated and ordained Minister of the Church of Scotland.

He had emigrated to Canada in the 1870s and become the Priest-in-Charge of Newcastle New Brunswick – a small fishing town with 1,500 parishioners.

There he raised six children of whom the youngest, naughtiest, wildest and most rebellious was the self-styled “runt of the litter” Max – the future Lord Beaverbrook.

Young Max, pumped the organ in his father’s church and showed a talent for memorising verses of Scripture. That was his sole virtue in the eyes of his judgemental father, for young Max was otherwise an extremely badly behaved teenager until, according to his own probably embroidered yarn, at the age of 20, he had a drunken accident with a lawnmower knocking himself unconscious.

When he woke up in hospital, he said the blow to his head had changed his life and converted him to the serious calling of making money.

In his twenties, Max made a lot of money first as a wheeler dealer in the Maritime provinces of Canada, then as a speculator, then as a mergers and acquisitions promoter and deal maker on the Toronto Stock Exchange.

By the time he was 29 he was a Bay Street dollar millionaire which in today’s money meant a multi-millionaire. Although he was doing extremely well in the world of Mammon, he never forgot his father’s sermons or the majestic cadences of the King James Bible.

My Great Uncle Max

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All his life he peppered his letters, his speeches, his newspaper editorials and his conversation with Biblical quotations, often quite wittily applied.

For example, his penultimate and much praised book: "*The Decline and Fall of Lloyd George*" bore his chosen subtitle:

"And Great was The Fall Thereof."

And to give a personal example, when I was 19 years old, I asked my Uncle Max for advice on how to sell advertising space in a student magazine I was editing called *Oxford Tory*.

He replied eloquently but impractically –

"Jonathan! You should heed the words of the Good Book:

"Cast your bread upon the waters and it shall return to you in a few days".

Perhaps that same quotation might have inspired him to make the next career move of his youth.

For in 1910, Max Aitken went to seek a bigger fortune on a wider stage than Toronto so he moved to London casting his bread on the waters of the Thames with a plan to sell bonds.

He knew no one in the City. He bought a large house in unfashionable Putney.

But he had one or two introductions in particular one to a Scottish businessman who was also a Conservative MP called Andrew Bonar Law.

Through Bonar Law, Max met other Conservative MPs including F.E Smith, Winston Churchill and a rising star on the Liberal back benches, David Lloyd George.

All seemed to enjoy the young Canadian businessman's energy, charm, sense of humour and vigorous command of the English language, for the young Max had a voracious appetite for reading authors like Kinglake, Dickens and Thackeray.

Through his new connections in politics, Max Aitken was adopted as the Conservative candidate for Ashton under Lyne in Lancashire and elected as the town's MP even though many of his voters could not understand his broad Canadian accent!

Once he was in the House of Commons, he moved up quickly in the political fast stream even getting a knighthood in the Coronation Honours of 1911, probably for making a large donation to the Conservative Party.

Three years later the First World War started.

Max Aitken had a part to play as a Canadian military representative who was also a British MP and also an increasingly close associate and friend of Bonar Law who had become the Conservative Party Leader.

FIRST WORLD WAR

To many close observers of the political scene in World War 1, by 1916 it seemed that England and her allies were in danger of losing the war because the Prime Minister H. H. Asquith was losing his grip as a war leader.

It was common knowledge that he was drinking too much, playing too much Bridge and writing too many love letters every day to his mistress Venetia Stanley.

Many thought he should go but it was the young Max Aitken, by behind-the-scenes manoeuvres practising what he called "Go-Betweenery", who greased the skids and engineered the fall of Asquith:

"It was the biggest thing I have ever done" said Beaverbrook in later years:

"I did it by honest intrigue. If the Asquith Government had gone on the country would have gone down."

These honest intrigues continued. Having been a King breaker, Sir Max Aitken became a King Maker by persuading Bonar Law and other leading Conservatives to accept David Lloyd George as the Coalition Prime Minister.

The new and dynamic Prime Minister Lloyd George appointed Max Aitken to the War Cabinet as Minister for Information and, despite opposition from George V, appointed him to a seat in the House of Lords.

"I have been relegated to the peerage" complained the new Lord Beaverbrook whose title came from the beavers he had watched from his bedroom in the Manse building dams on the brooks of the Miramichi River.

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Beaverbrook was an effective member of the War Cabinet as Minister for Information, but the Upper House bored him.

He called it: "The House of Make Believe."

So having acquired a taste for official propaganda he turned his hand to unofficial propaganda by buying a controlling stake in *The Daily Express*.

This was a weekly rag of a minor tabloid newspaper selling only 30,000 copies a day compared to the mighty *Daily Mail's* 2 million circulation.

Between the wars and after the Second World War, Beaverbrook threw his heart, soul and formidable energy into building up *The Daily Express*.

In time it sold 4 million copies a day while its sister paper *The Sunday Express* sold 5 million copies and the influential *Evening Standard* sold over a million copies every evening in London.

Beaverbrook was a hands-on proprietor. Almost every day he cajoled his editors, dictating leaders, news stories, Gossip column items (which he loved) and of course, political headlines.

Late in life I saw him in action doing his proprietor's routines.

I remember at one lunch time at Cherkley he was sitting at the head of the table when a telex machine station immediately to his right whirled into action.

The ticker tape which he passed to me reported a minor news item to the effect that two British soldiers in the British Army of the Rhine had been killed when their jeep had been struck by lightning.

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Not much of a news story I thought but Uncle Max thought differently.

"Ah this could be good mischief making ammunition for our crusade against the German led Common Market."

He picked up his direct line telephone to the Editor of *The Daily Express*:

"This is the Chief Shareholder" he began.

"Who's in charge of the clattering train today?"

The surprised Editor a Mr Derek Marks was told this story could help the paper's crusade against the German led Common Market supported by Harold Macmillan's government.

"I suggest we put it on the front page! A small human-interest story but give it tihs big headline:

BRITISH SOLDIER SLAIN IN GERMAN (!) (BIG EYE-TALICS) THUNDERSTORM!

And it then went on the First Page the next morning.

For nearly half a century Beaverbrook took this kind of intense and interfering interest in his newspapers.

With tongue fairly in his cheek he told at the 1948 Royal Commission on the Press "I run my newspapers purely for the purposes of propaganda."

In fact he had the natural flair of a great editor.

He paid far and away the highest wages for journalists on Fleet Street bribing them away from *The Daily Mail*, *The News Chronicle*, *The Daily Sketch*.

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"If ya come over to the sunny side of the street your wife will wear mink!" he said when recruiting the columnist, George Gale.

Often he was personally involved in the firing as well as hiring of journalists.

There was a story about this at the time of the overthrow of King Farouk of Egypt by Colonel Nasser in the 1950s.

On the night of the coup when the tanks rolled *The Daily Express* reporter based in Cairo had enjoyed too good a dinner so had slept through the excitement and missed the story. When he came down to breakfast, he found a telegram awaiting him:

KING FAROUK ABDICATED LAST NIGHT. WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS? BEAVERBROOK

Beaverbrook's best buccaneering years as a successful newspaper proprietor coincided with Winston Churchill's wilderness years as a politician.

Their friendship endured and also resulted in numerous lucrative commissions for Churchill to write articles for *The Daily* and *Sunday Express*.

And then as Churchill had warned along came the Second World War.

And on this very day May 14 1940, 85 years ago, Churchill became Prime Minister and formed his War Cabinet.

One of the many desperate problems facing the new Prime Minister was German superiority in the air.

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The Luftwaffe had at least twice as many fighters as the Royal Air Force. Beaverbrook was given the War Cabinet job as Minister of Aircraft Production.

He did the job with such unorthodox if not piratical brilliance that within less than a year we built enough Spitfires not only to fight and win the Battle of Britain but to gain superiority in the air for the RAF for the rest of the war.

How did Beaverbrook do it?

It would take far too long to tell you in any great detail but perhaps two notices still surviving he put up in his office give the flavour of his ministerial style:

NOTICE NUMBER ONE:

“Committees take the punch out of War.”

NOTICE NUMBER TWO:

“Organisation is the enemy of improvisation.”

In practice what this meant was that Beaverbrook ruthlessly circumvented the bureaucracy of the Air Ministry and of the home departments often much to the fury of his Cabinet colleague Ernie Bevan.

But he raided production lines of factories and the spares depots of the Air Ministry and he broke numerous regulations to get newly built and cannibalised Spitfires and Hurricanes to the airfields where they were needed.

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He also ran a national campaign to get the extra steel to build the aircraft from unorthodox sources ranging from Russian suppliers to British housewives who, as part of his national campaign, donated their pots and pans to be melted down to make wings for Spitfires.

His first 120 days in office were a whirlwind of almost revolutionary activity but they worked.

In a minute sent to Churchill dated September 2 1940 Beaverbrook reported:

"SINCE YOUR GOVERNMENT WAS FOUNDED ON MAY 14 THE RAF HAS RECEIVED ALMOST 1,000 NEW OPERATIONAL AIRCRAFT TO STRENGTHEN ITS UNITS AND ANOTHER 720 AIRCRAFT HAVE BEEN SHIPPED TO UNITS ABROAD"

He signed off this official memo with a line from the popular wartime song:

"Nobody knows the trouble I've seen" to which the Prime Minister added in his handwriting:

"I do."

After his explosively successful year as Minister for Aircraft Production, once the job was done, Beaverbrook got bored.

He went on to become Minister of Supply but to Churchill's chagrin he resigned from this post saying that there was not enough to do.

He was a man of action rather than a man of politics or Parliament.

He was only at his best in the middle of a *drama* (which he always pronounced with a short 'a').

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Perhaps the neatest summing up on Beaverbrook's contribution to political life during two World Wars was this, written by one of his eleven biographers, Peter Howard:

"We would have lost the First World War if Beaverbrook had not brought Asquith down.

And we would have lost the Second World War if Beaverbrook had not got the Spitfires up."

Well beat that!

Then there are several other sides of Beaverbrook which deserve a mention not least because they go some way towards answering the second question with which I conclude this talk.

Why should we take an interest in Beaverbrook today?

Here are some quick ones in addition to his obviously historical importance.

Beaverbrook could teach us a great deal today about campaigning.

He was radical in his crusades, as he liked to call them, which included contemporary causes such as equal rights and pay for women, Euroscepticism and Free Trade.

In his case Empire Free trade but I think today he would mean World Free trade which deserves far more attention after the Horlicks of Trump's tariff wars.

Another big Beaverbrook crusade was for closer ties with Canada.

I travelled with my Uncle Max in 1963 to New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario and so I saw at first-hand how deep his roots were in the country of his birth.

Anglo-Canadian relations have been glowing too feebly on the backburner in both countries for far too long. But perhaps they may be moving back to centre stage in the age of Trump and Carney.

So it is of particular pleasure to see the Canadian High Commissioner and Deputy High Commissioner here tonight – perhaps the 21st century Beaverbrook Forum will help Anglo-Canadian relations become a higher priority.

Thirdly, Beaverbrook deserves more attention as an author and historian of considerable importance. His best books do stand the test of time particularly “*Men and Power*” whose witty opening profiles are worthy of an Aubrey or a Pepys. His other great book is “*The Decline and Fall of Lloyd George*” a wonderful first-hand account of:

- How the war time coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberals ended
- How The 1922 Committee came into existence
- And how on earth we ended up with the unknown Bonar Law as our Prime Minister. It’s another Beaverbrook as Kingmaker story.

Beaverbrook also wrote, as many authors do, some rather mediocre books.

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However, they sold surprisingly well such as "*Success*" or *Don't Trust to Luck*" which contains the remarkable sentence:

"Shelley was a great poet, but he would not have been a success on Wall Street."

But even great Homer nods.

My only point here is to say that Beaverbrook the author and historian deserves a rerating.

PHILANTHROPY

My last reason for suggesting that some aspects of the Beaverbrook story are worth thinking about today was his astonishing generosity or philanthropy.

According to his leading biographer A.J.P. Taylor for most of his life Beaverbrook gave away more than half his annual income to charities or to those in distress.

That might be an underestimate because whenever asked questions on this subject Beaverbrook would respond with a Biblical quotation:

"When thou givest alms do not sound the trumpet before thee so thine alms also may be in secret." (Matthew Chapter 6).

Despite the secrecy we do have a few glimpses of Beaverbrook's generosity. He gave the Prime Minister he had deposed - H.H. Asquith, a pension of £1,000 a year on hearing that he had become hard up.

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When he heard F.E. Smith's daughters had been left nothing by their improvident father Beaverbrook gave Eleanor and Pamela Smith annuities of £375 a year (large sums in those days).

These were ancient gifts revealed only in ancient archives.

But in living memory I was personally aware of similar gifts of pensions and annuities given in their old age in the 1950s and 1960s to Beaverbrook's household staff, or retired *Daily Express* reporters, or hot metal printers or acquaintances who had fallen on hard times.

Besides these personal gifts there were benefactions to big projects here in London.

St Columba's Church in Pont Street would not have been built without Beaverbrook philanthropy. In Canada, he set up the Canadian War Memorials Fund and War Records Office.

He was also a leading benefactor to the University of New Brunswick and founder of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. His enduring legacy continues to this day through the Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation.

His generosity was emotional and practical, rather than financial, to his old friend Winston Churchill. This is Randolph's territory tonight not mine but in one way it was slightly surprising because the Winston-Max friendship had more than its fair share of ups and downs.

At one point Beaverbrook said:

"Churchill on the crest of a wave has in him the stuff of which tyrants are made."

Rather too frank an observation, perhaps, from an over candid friend.

My final words tonight are to return to the question which Max and I asked each other over lunch at White's some weeks ago when we both came up with the idea of tonight's launch event of the Beaverbrook Forum.

The question was: Why has the First Lord Beaverbrook seemingly slipped into oblivion in the 61 years since he died?

Why has so big a figure of his time become so largely forgotten today?

Perhaps there are two reasons both of them are wrong in my view.

- 1) Beaverbrook was too restless, too much on the move, too easily bored and too much of a flibbertigibbet as Violet Bonham Carter once called him to leave permanent footprints on the sands of time. He was always fidgeting or flitting from project to project and so became seen by some as a transient lightweight.
- 2) Beaverbrook made too many enemies. As you all now will realise this talk has been given by a great nephew who loved and adored and hero worshipped his great uncle, only just this side of idolatry. However, it is not difficult to find hostile critics.

Press lords are often deeply disliked. There was a popular ditty doing the rounds at that time:

*"When round for public works we look,
Two pressing tasks at once appear,
To dam for ever Beaverbrook
And dredge the mud from Rothermere."*

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Also, Prime Minister Baldwin had no love for Beaverbrook, who he once accused in a by-election speech of: "Exercising the privilege of the harlot throughout the ages. Power without responsibility."

Also, some key members of the Royal Family have never forgotten his championing of Edward VIII at the time of his abdication or for his subsequent feuding with Mountbatten.

At one point some critical article about Mountbatten in *The Daily Express* provoked his nephew, Philip Mountbatten, Duke of Edinburgh, to snap audibly and publicly:

"The Express is a bloody awful newspaper."

His words were headlines everywhere.

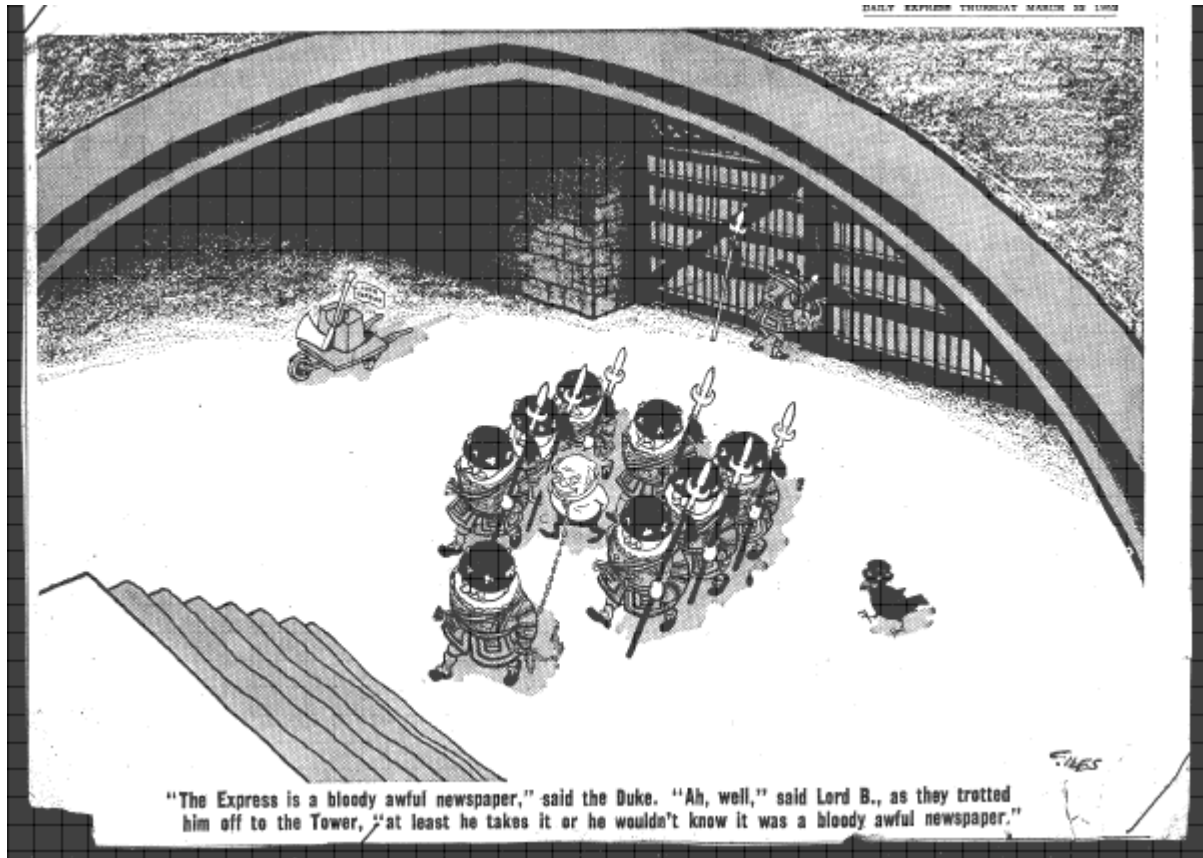
How did *The Express* respond?

Its proprietor persuaded his cartoonist Giles to draw a hilarious cartoon of a diminutive Lord Beaverbrook in chains trotting into the Tower of London in front of some burley Beefeaters.

And the caption consisted of the prisoner, with one of his huge impish grins saying cheekily:

"The Express is a bloody awful newspaper" says the Duke.

"Ah well!" said Lord B ..as they trotted him off to the Tower, "at least he takes it or he wouldn't know it was a bloody awful newspaper!"



Ah well.... Whether it was commissioning cartoons by Giles, crusading, or championing his Christian faith even in his final octogenarian years, Beaverbrook kept moving.

I said at the start of this talk that we should never forget that he was a son of the Manse.

He kept in his bedroom a big notice – a Victorian piece of embroidery – which proclaimed the message:

"Better to be an evangelist

Than a millionaire or a Cabinet Minister."

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And as if to demonstrate his point, in his 84th year, Beaverbrook published his last book, *The Divine Propagandist* – a short biography of Jesus Christ. It was mocked by some contemporary book critics. But, right now, *The Divine Propagandist* reads like a serious work of theology, examining the reasons why the Parables (or propaganda) of Jesus gained such world renown.

Ah well.... Seen in the round as a politician, a newspaper proprietor, author, crusader or philanthropist and even, perhaps, as an amateur theologian. I believe that the time has come for some Beaverbrook revisionism, revivalism and renewed attention in the public square.

These challenges now fall to a rising generation. The torch is passed tonight to another Max Aitken, the future Lord Beaverbrook. Under his leadership, may this new Beaverbrook Forum we are inaugurating tonight flourish and crusade well into the months and years to come.

And perhaps as I end, we can hear the voice of Old Max, the first Lord Beaverbrook, chuckling and saying:

“And while you’re about it, don’t forget to stir up mischief!”

Thank you for listening to me tonight.