Shelf Life

Nick Duffell

gendercentre@aol.com

It is seldom you read a foreword to an autobiography by the deceased writer's father, but Alan Watts' *In my Own Way* starts just so: the first of many surprises in this delightfully good read. Alan always was a natural talker and writer, and the father honours his gifted son for his insight and clarity. Nice.

Humanistic and transpersonal psychology evolved in a close partnership, and Watt's contribution to this field I knew was immense. But until reading this I didn't know he was an Englishman, since the works I have were mostly written in California or Japan. He was also what I call a Boarding School Survivor *Rebel Type*, albeit a prodigy, who in 1931, aged 16, while still at King's Canterbury, was corresponding authoritatively with the head of the UK Buddhist lodge. But what got me really hooked was that as I turn sixty, this astonishing searcher died months before reaching that age, doubtless with tales and teaching still to come. I am sad that he was unable to share his thoughts about aging consciously, as Richard Alpert (Ram Dass), whom Watts knew well and agreed with - at least on the need to abandon psychedelics - has attempted.

Nor did I previously know that in order to find a niche for his spiritual inquisitiveness and to avoid a 'proper' job he became an Episcopal minister, serving five years before quitting to devote himself fully to Zen - for him the cleanest, least sentimental, most experiential path. What amazed me, however, is how seriously he also took his job, immersing himself in several years' depth study of the entire canon of Christian theology before ordainment. His puts it thus:

> '... the Christian scene had beauty – as in the corona of Canterbury, the Gregorian chant ... and rooks in the trees beyond Canon Dawson's rectory – but it had no depth. I wanted to plumb and understand *being* itself, the very heart of and ground of the universe, not to control it, but simply to wonder at it, for I was – and still am – amazed at my own existence.'

In this part-ramble, part-treatise, part-history of the 60s and human consciousness movement, Watts' book is great fun as he delivers gossip and opinions about people whose books line my shelves, and doubtless yours: Edridge Cleaver, Lawrence Ferlingatti, Richard Hittleman, Ken Casey, Christmas Humphries, Ginsberg, Karouac, Korzybski, Krishnamurti, Leary, Snyder, Suzuki, and so on.

But touchingly, the book also reveals - alongside his genius for simply explaining the unfathomable - a life busy with all kinds of human weaknesses. He was many things: brilliant, flamboyant and egotistical, addicted to wine and cigars; a networker (before we had the name) and a name-dropper; both loveable and irritating, a lover of sex and women, but clearly unable to manage either, and badly in need of being taken care of (in this he was a true product of his education). In short he was really human, if not humanistic.