INSIDE STORY: The life of John Stott
Roger Steer

John Stott towers over the history of twentieth century evangelicalism, and remains a man of enormous influence through his writings, his preaching and his personal leadership. Roger Steer has written an accessible account of John Stott’s life.

The biographer’s first challenge is to reckon with the sheer number of people who are significant in the story—and in whose stories John Stott is significant. The Table of Contents helpfully doubles as a timeline as we follow the subject through his early steps in life and then as a Christian into his emergence as a leader. From the moment Stott hits his stride, the pace of the book is fairly breathless. If this were a stage play rather than a book, then it could be set on a moving stage so that a long succession of leading Christians may efficiently be shuffled on stage left, be introduced, and then slide off to stage-right.

Perhaps life around John Stott was really like that. As the book continues it is with some relief that the train of visitors subsides and more of the man’s personal passions emerge: the certainty that life for Christ is the only and best way to live; his personal discipline and holiness; his passion for preaching; his gifts coupled with humility and sense of humour. The middle section manages not to leave the reader intimidated; the final section manages to leave the reader inspired. John Stott is also a prolific author and Steer does a good job of summarising the major works and the contexts from which they sprang. This is a good introduction to John Stott’s life and writings given the space available, but we get little chance to reflect on his inner thoughts. We discover that he was criticised by people who did not work as hard to understand his position as he did to understand theirs. But there is no clear engagement with his evangelical critics’ views, and the struggles he faced are mentioned but hardly analysed: tensions with his father about war service; differences with evangelicals over Billy Graham’s mission and methods; divergence with Martyn Lloyd-Jones; differences between the ‘narrow’ and ‘broad’ views of evangelism in the Lausanne process; disputes over conditional immortality. We also hear little of the theological currents at each stage, again for lack of space.

The fact of John Stott’s birdwatching is of course mentioned: the passion of it does not quite come across. (And there is a ‘quest for the snowy owl’). Those who did not live through these times personally will do well by reading a biography of Stott, and Steer’s life is an excellent introduction, much shorter than Timothy Dudley-Smith’s two volumes. It will help us begin to appreciate the influence of Stott’s writings in shaping evangelicalism today in Britain and beyond. And readers of any age should be inspired by Stott’s example, humbled by his godliness, and stimulated to serve his Master.

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Martyn Lloyd-Jones and John Stott were the two most prominent evangelical ministers in London in the 1960s. Both attracted large congregations through their expository preaching in prestigious pulpits—Lloyd-Jones at Westminster Chapel, near Buckingham Palace, and Stott at All Souls Church, near Oxford Street. Both had fruitful ministries more widely as evangelical leaders and organizers, for example, among university students through the Inter-Varsity Fellowship. In October 1966, Lloyd-Jones was 66 years old and nearing retirement; Stott was the younger man, aged 45, but was already a recogniz 53 John Stott Quotes. "It is impossible to pray for someone without loving him, and impossible to go on praying for him without discovering that our love for him grows and matures." - John Stott. Topics: Prayer. "Every Christian should be both conservative and radical; conservative in preserving the faith and radical in applying it." - John Stott. Topics: Commitment. "A person's life is his most precious possession. Consequently, to rob him of it is the greatest sin we can commit against him, while to give one's own life on his behalf is the greatest possible expression of love for him. This, then, is the ultimate contrast: Cain's hatred issued in murder, Christ's love (issued) in self-sacrifice." - John Stott.