

THE LIFE OF J. K. HUYSMANS. By Robert Baldick. (Oxford University Press, Geoffrey Cumberlege; 42s.)

The publication of an authoritative biography of Huysmans was long overdue, for that strange figure remains comparatively unknown in the English-speaking world. Even without the publisher's assurance that Dr Baldick had 'devoted many years of research to the subject', it is quite clear that the author's scholarship fitted him admirably to perform what must have been at times both a difficult and delicate task. The book is scrupulously documented; extensive use is made of Huysmans' letters and autobiographical novels so that no arbitrary division exists between the man and his works.

It is a pity that the style, especially in the translations, is inclined to be laboured. Admittedly, Huysmans' prose, which is itself involved, may explain this in part, but that cannot justify the use of such sentences as: 'This Magdalen is truly admirable and I should be sorry not to be in correspondence with her. She writes very well, too, and in a singularly virile style, this good repentant' (pp. 227-8). Other instances could be given where almost equally unfortunate constructions have been employed.

While the documentation is usually, as we said, above reproach, there are a few minor points which Dr Baldick might have been well advised to clarify. For instance, when he discusses the probability of Huysmans' having actually attended a Black Mass, his dismissal of Abbé Mugnier's evidence appears rather cavalier (p. 149). In the same way, Dr Baldick has probably excellent reasons to justify his supposition about 'Madame X', but the one which he actually advances seems inadequate (p. 330): if Huysmans was capable of placing such a 'mistaken interpretation' 'on innocent demonstrations of affection', he must have acquired, with age, a degree of naivety which, in a man of his experience, is almost incredible.

It could be argued with truth that these are relatively unimportant matters; the book has one rather more serious defect: Dr Baldick, who depicts admirably the diversity, the curious contradictions of Huysmans' nature, is less successful in giving us a composite portrait of his subject. The chapter 'The Convert', for instance, notes the elements which contributed to Huysmans' conversion (p. 179); it stresses insufficiently the correlation between these elements and Huysmans' nature. This latter point is, after all, capital if the reader is to understand Huysmans: the interest of a conversion, from the psychological point of view, depends not so much upon the actual causes, which, objectively considered, often seem totally inadequate, but upon those traits in the convert's mental and spiritual outlook which explain why, in his particular case, the causes become operative.

In one sense, however, this is a defect resulting from those qualities which make Dr Baldick's book what it is: the very wealth of one's material can, on occasions, prove a liability owing to the difficulty of getting it into perspective and of depicting the fundamental unity underlying the intricate lines of the character-pattern which emerges.

It is, therefore, clear that such criticism as can be voiced is subordinate to one fact: Dr Baldick, by his presentation of hitherto unavailable material and by the conscientiousness with which he sketches the different facets of Huysmans' complex personality, has put every student of the subject in his debt—and that is, after all, the ultimate test of excellence for a book of this type.

KATHLEEN O'FLAHERTY

UP THE GREEN RIVER. By Thomas Gilby. (Eyre and Spottiswoode; 15s.)

NO TRUE LIFE. By Miriam Blanco-Fombona. (Lincolns-Praeger; 12s. 6d.)

MASTER'S HOUSE. By Barbara Collard. (Eyre and Spottiswoode; 12s. 6d.)

For his first novel, Father Thomas Gilby has chosen to write an 'honest-to-goodness' adventure story. That does not mean that it lacks that 'human' or psychological interest which seems so vitally necessary to contemporary themes in fiction. In fact, this book has the fullest possible combination of events with the insight into human character which is not merely expository or explanatory but understanding. Richard French, a priestly young dreamer, leads a group of people in the mid-nineteenth century from his industrial parish in the Midlands to a land of promise in South America. This is the history of their fortunes, caught between the schemings of two rival States, charmed and yet bewildered by their new-found situation, human, political and geographical. Battles at sea, attacks by night, intrigues in high circles—how expertly Father Gilby seems to move from the one to the other! It is an *expertise* which is only rivalled by the way in which in clear bold lines he draws the character of Richard French, bewitched by the intriguing Maria Aguilar; the lovable practical Peregrine Tempest, whose spirituality will not be clogged by an alien piety; the suave, subtle, yet sincere court chaplain; the evangelical sea captain; the one-eyed belligerent lay brother. But it is pointless to go on, unless to suggest the enjoyment that lies in store for those who are not discouraged from reading by the length of the book or by the feeling that the reviewer has hinted at something *demodé*. This is not a great novel. I do not think the author ever dreamt of it as such. But for several hours of thoroughly enjoyable reading, slightly remote from reality and yet sufficiently informed by it, this is first-rate.