

shadowed for a time by her inability to comprehend his stand against the king. One forgets, until Mr Reynolds makes the point, that Margaret's was the typical contemporary view. Her father's sacrifice seemed so absurd that it looked for a while as if she were going to be unable to understand why he must make it. Eventually the principle was as clear to her as it was to him, that there was to be no dictation to anyone else's conscience. Having accepted that, she could make her sacrifice of him. Once the tension was resolved, their understanding of each other found a new depth. Their two characters are never more clear to us than at the final parting.

More has justifiably been considered to belong at the very summit of English spirituality, and in this connection one can recall how Paul Renaudin put his finger on precisely what constitutes the Englishness of the tradition which More epitomizes . . . 'Besoin, non seulement de solitude, mais d'indépendance: l'individualisme de la race s'est manifesté là comme ailleurs.' There is never any question that More consulted a spiritual director about the stand he took, since obviously there was no one on whom he could depend. 'There is no man living, of whom while he liveth, I may make myself sure.' All the clergy were weak and shortsighted, he concluded, with an utterly saintly compassion and lack of bitterness.

The great merit of this book is that here we have hagiography writing itself, father and daughter composing a spiritual testament to comfort one another. It is a deeply moving book. The passages from More's work and his correspondence with Margaret are chosen with such perception that we are given a treasury of vintage More that adds considerably to our appreciation of an imposing, vivid and lovable character. One feels that Margaret would have approved of the author's achievement entirely, since it focuses our attention on her father rather than on herself. Nonetheless, that particular focus is something that only she could provide, which is why this book really does give us something new.

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THE AGE OF MARTYRS. By Giuseppe Ricciotti, trans. Anthony Bull, C.R.L. (Geoffrey Chapman; 24s.)

Abbot Ricciotti's *Era dei Martiri* is a book that achieves something which had always seemed unlikely. The ground of Christian antiquity, covered by endless dreary manuals, could conceivably be transmuted by an author with a really personal grasp of a wide variety of sources, to such an extent that the subject would seem no longer remote, but

near, no longer dead, but actually living. (At first glance, admittedly, one is dangerously reminded of a manual because of the numbered paragraphs, but in fact this is a rather useful device of cross-reference that dispenses with quite a few footnotes.) *The Age of Martyrs* achieves the unlikely, to say the least, and the translation is so good that even in its merely expositive parts it never bores, and in its more exciting moments is as dramatic and evocative as Mary Renault. The synthesis of source material, Christian and pagan, is very cleverly done, the acts of the martyrs (the genuine ones, that is) being fitted into a background of Roman political history and law which enables one to see the early Christians not so much sinned against as sinning—from the Empire's point of view. There was a meaning behind the persecutions, which were not pogroms. The fifty-three years between the election of Diocletian and the death of Constantine that this book covers, witness a succession of desperate men trying to bring about organization and coherence in an Empire too vast and too artificial to allow of either. Unity in the Empire came first, and the Christians were enemies to imperial religion, and therefore to unity. Eventually Constantine was shrewd enough to conclude that Christianity was a better unifying factor, although even then he had the problem of maintaining unity among the Christians.

The book really develops round the figure of Constantine, despite the mists that encircle him. His course could not really be criticized by Christian standards until almost the end of his life, when he came out on the side of Christianity after years of deliberation. Ricciotti, however, does tend to judge him during the uncommitted period in the tones of a reproachful headmaster who is rather disappointed in his head boy. It is the only inconsistency, however, and the rest of the imperial men at the top are taken for what they are, with all their muscular, Hollywood brutality. This is the world of Waugh's *Helena*, where quarrelsome, ambitious families come out of the Balkans to destroy each other. It is an antique land, with an outlook very different from our own. In the face of the pagan preoccupation to keep the Empire going at all costs, the Christians in their *acta* seem more than ever alive and credible. Their fortitude in the face of appalling odds makes one realize that there are more worrying problems than Communists and atom bombs. The Christian side of Ricciotti's picture is indeed so grandiose that if old Rome had anything to hand on that was worth having, the new Rome was infinitely worthy of it. The Pretorian guard kept its dignity to the end, and the Christian community, when it could come out into the light of day, was quietly ready to take over.

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