

**COMMENTARY ON THE NEW TESTAMENT: A CHAPTER BY CHAPTER EXPOSITION** by E. M. Blaiklock, *Hodder & Stoughton, 1977. pp. 271 £1.00*

When I was younger, I was in the habit of reading a portion (say 15 verses) of the Bible every day, in a sequence suggested by, and with notes published by the Scripture Union. One of those who contributed notes (comments of perhaps 150 words on the day's portion) was Dr E. M. Blaiklock, head of the Department of Classics at Auckland University. This one-volume commentary by him is very much in the style, if I remember rightly, of those notes.

Scripture Union is a conservative evangelical movement, with an approach to the Bible which many would characterise as fundamentalist. However, if 'fundamentalist' implies opposition to the idea of using scholarship as an aid to understanding the Bible, the term would not apply to Dr Blaiklock. He would certainly see classical and semitic studies as providing important background to and explanation of the New Testament text: thus, on Ephesus in the context of Rev. 2: "At the seaward end of the Cayster valley Ephesus commanded the terminus of a great trade route. It was an ancient Greek colony, a magnificently appointed city whose greatness was past. The harbour was silting like that of the rival city Miletus at the end of the neighbouring Maeander valley... It had held a great church, well-informed and devoted . . . but growing weary along with the city in which it had ministered." I hardly think that this extract supports the publishers' contention that Dr Blaiklock's scholarship is 'unobtrusive'; but more power to anyone who tries to see the New Testament in its socio-economic context.

But if Dr Blaiklock is open to some forms of scholarship, he is less than sympathetic to—or versed in—the scholarly discipline of Biblical criticism. There is a general suspicion of the tribe of New Testament critics; e.g. on Gal. 2: "Some, in that search for damaging contradiction which seems endemic among New Testament critics, and so alien to classical critics, have imagined (sic!) discrepancies between Galatians and Acts." (p. 165b). There seems to be a pressing need to prove that the New Testament is 'true' by, presumably, the canons of 20th century historiography (whatever those are), and a lamentable

failure to see what kind of literature the different New Testament documents are.

item: Matthew's infancy narratives are not noted as essentially different from the rest of the gospel; time is spent protesting the innocence of Mary which is lost for noting much of the wealth of Old Testament allusion.

item: The insights gained from redaction criticism fail to illumine the comments on the synoptics. For instance, on the rather obscure remark about the leaven of the Pharisees; Matthew and Mark have it in the same context, with the typical difference that the disciples in Matthew finally understand, while in Mark they remain puzzled; in Matthew leaven is interpreted to mean 'teaching'. In Luke the logion is in a different context, and leaven is interpreted to mean hypocrisy. In his comments on the Mark account Dr Blaiklock refers across to Matthew and Luke but notes no discrepancies or redactional emphasis.

item: The speeches in Acts are taken straight; and the comment on Acts 2: 40 ("With many other such words he gave witness . . .") is that it "suggests that records of such sermons were preserved. The age was thoroughly literate." And a comment on I Peter (p. 234b) implies that the Sermon on the Mount was just that, and that Peter remembered it in detail.

item: The letters of the New Testament are all seen uncritically as letters, and from their traditional authors, (though Hebrews is not Pauline, at least.) The distinctive theologies are underplayed in favour of a sense of the doctrinal homogeneity of the New Testament. Paul and James are hardly even in tension.

Perhaps these strictures are beside the mark, since the commentary is

- a) highly compact,
- b) offered as, among other things, a guide to personal devotions.

But, a) there is apparently room for scholarly comment as indicated above, and, b) devotion is never the worse for good scholarship. I would prefer a brief comment on some Greek idiom in II Cor. 7 to this all too typical rhetorical flourish: "The chapter should be read as a unit and in a contemporary translation. It reveals Paul the pastor, as no other passage in his writings

does. It needs small comment for the words burn with a soul's sincerity, lucid, dexterously woven. The style is the man . . ."

So, while my reading of this volume has encouraged me to believe in the possible value of a popular, compact one-

volume commentary on the New Testament, (especially one as cheaply produced and handily-sized as this,) I feel the cause of popularisation could have found a better champion.

COLIN CARR O.P.

#### IN DEFENCE OF OPERA by Hamish F.

Readers of *New Blackfriars* have had a foretaste of Professor Swanston's theses about opera. Set out at much greater length in this most intelligent and agreeable book they seem much more persuasive. There is a certain residual puritanism—I mean the Mary Whitehouse kind rather than the John Bunyan variety—that was obvious in the articles but is less obtrusive here. Still it exists. For one thing why *in defence* of opera? Father Swanston is not writing for sceptics or philistines in the world of opera. I don't see him attracting the editor of this journal into his circle of readers. No-one will get much out of his book without some enjoyment of and experience of opera performances. The defence is, to my mind, aimed against those who think opera trivial or immoral: anyone who thinks *Così* the one or *Tristan* the other is best written off as invincibly ignorant. What Father Swanston has done is to write a serious book for serious opera-lovers presenting opera as a form of drama of the most serious kind. There are no music examples in the book and it is as far away from such collections of opera plots as Kobbe as it could well be. The book is not about musical techniques nor about libretti but about the finished product. Father Swanston has, I think, produced the best discussion of the relationship of music to text I know. He writes about opera as a form of behaviour. Starting with composer and librettist, then looking at the result historically and assessing the part played by social factors, with some discussion of the role of singers (which he treats—and how right he is—as much less important than most writers on opera do) and a very perceptive essay on the producer and the production. The conductor, like the prima donna, stands in the background. This is a novel perspective but of a piece with Father Swanston's insistence that opera is a kind of activity that takes the form of comments on

#### G. Swanston, *Pelican*, 1978 pp.314 £1.25

human experience. In the hands of the masters like Mozart and Wagner those comments are of a major order. With lesser masters such as Bizet and Bellini, something of importance is still said. Father Swanston's comments on *Carmen* give a fair sample of the strength of his approach. He points to the fracas its alleged 'immorality' caused on its first appearance and contrasts this with its speedy acceptance as suitable family entertainment. This because the audience all know; "full well that this is happening to someone else. The way in which the story is told by Bizet deliberately prevents it being understood as a story about ourselves." Operas of the very first rank are, of course, stories about ourselves and are liable to give great offence because they are true stories. What is more the truth of the story is essential to the greatness of the opera.

This view leads to problems not all of which Father Swanston has solved. He seems to me to elevate Richard Strauss to a ludicrously high level. He makes very high claims for *Rosenkavalier* but he never mentions what seems to me an insuperable objection to taking it seriously: the opera begins with the *Marschallin* in bed with her lover Oktavian, who is, of course, another high soprano. I think Father Swanston might agree that a production of *Macbeth* with Danny la Rue as Lady Macbeth could scarcely be taken seriously. Likewise *Rosenkavalier* seems to me to belong to the genre of old-fashioned pantomime with the qualification that the principal boy plays second fiddle to the principal girl in this entertainment. He does not care much for Puccini and his case against the operas is well-argued. He points out what is now generally accepted that Puccini had a strong sado-masochistic streak and this is what made him insist on having *Tosca* kept on stage whilst her lover is shot. I do not think Father Swanston has got the psychological dimension of his