

## OBITER

**SIR EDMUND WHITTAKER.** Sir Edmund Whittaker, who died at his home in Edinburgh in March, was not only a very great mathematician and an exemplary Catholic but also a devoted friend and benefactor of the Dominican Order, especially of the University Catholic Chaplaincy in George Square. It is therefore only fitting that tribute to his memory should appear in *BLACKFRIARS*.

Others more competent to judge have written elsewhere of his brilliant achievements in all branches of mathematics. His remarkable contributions in the various fields of pure and applied mathematics, statistics, astronomy and the history of mathematics and physics bring to the mind of a Dominican the inevitable comparison with the many-sided genius of St Albert the Great. Perhaps less well known is his interest, especially as a young Fellow of Trinity, in the work of Whitehead and Russell in that most fascinating field which is the border-line between mathematics and logic. In mathematics, as in most sciences, it is most unusual for a man to do original work after early middle age; Whittaker was perhaps unique in that his original, creative genius flourished until almost the end of his long life. His death brings the end of an era in the history of mathematics and physics for he was almost alone in being active in thought and writing during the past sixty years which have seen so many changes in these sciences.

It is perhaps as a lecturer that Whittaker remains most vividly in the memory of those who were his pupils. He was unequalled in lucidity, rising even to eloquence, in his exposition of the most difficult mathematical problems. It was his custom in Edinburgh to lecture for at least one term in the year to the First Ordinary Mathematics class. This was an enormous class consisting mainly of students who had no particular interest or ability in mathematics but who had to take the subject as part of their Degree Group. In the peculiar tradition of the Scottish Universities such a class would normally be rather a rowdy one, but it was never so when Whittaker was lecturing. His clear, penetrating voice, rather high-pitched, his clarity of exposition, his evident sincerity and interest in all the students, his most attractive sense of humour made him the best-loved of Professors, one whom everybody wished to please. Perhaps his most endearing quality was his unbounded kindness to all; he was just as interested in and gave as generously of his time and genius to the dullest and most ignorant first-year student as to the élite in the Final Honours school.

In 1931 the Dominicans returned to Edinburgh after an absence of

four centuries to establish a new University Chaplaincy for Catholic students in George Square. From the day of their arrival Whittaker, who lived at the other side of the Square, was their most valued friend and generous benefactor. In the early days, when life was hard for the Fathers and for the students, he showed his generosity in countless intimate ways. In those days the students were a penurious lot, but we knew that if we needed a kettle for tea-making or an electric fire to reduce the chill of Edinburgh's icy winter we had only to ask the 'Professor'. It was his unfailing support and his influence, exercised unobtrusively in University circles, allied to the zeal and labours of Father Giles Black, which rapidly made the Chaplaincy one of the best-known institutions in University life in Edinburgh. Accompanied by Lady Whittaker, also a most devoted and popular friend of the students and Chaplaincy, he rarely missed a Sunday afternoon meeting during term. We who were students then perhaps did not fully realize how privileged we were, but without exception we loved and admired him.

DROSTAN MACLAREN, O.P.

WALTER DE LA MARE. In one of John Buchan's most endearing novels, *Huntingtower*, there was a young man who passionately longed to be a poet, but his appearance and his name—John Heritage—were, he gloomily observed, altogether too poetical for him to have any hope of success: real poets had vulgar monosyllables for names, like John Keats. But the exhibition which the National Book League have been holding in honour of Mr Walter de la Mare's eighty-third birthday gives Mr Heritage the lie. Walter de la Mare is a name that eminently becomes a poet, and the photographs brilliantly displayed upon the walls of the exhibition show a man who, from the beginning of his career until this present plenitude of days, has displayed good looks of so dark and romantic a kind that the imagination could hardly have invented a more poetical looking poet, even if put to it. The number of publications covered by this exhibition was enormously large, for Mr de la Mare's output, even considering it takes in some fifty years, is prodigious; there were early editions and late of many of his works; copies of some long out of print; copies illustrated by artists so wide apart in time and type as Dickie Doyle and John Piper; broadsheets of the 'twenties and sober, decorous volumes from Faber in the 'fifties. But then Mr de la Mare has long enjoyed a number of established reputations; as a poet of childhood, as a writer of the most subtle prose, as an anthologist of a new and wonderfully creative kind; as a master of the macabre and as a lyrist of rare genius. What, I think, is less generally recognized is the courage and realism with which