

SEARCH YOUR SOUL, EUSTACE: A Survey of the Religious Novel in the Victorian Age, by Margaret M. Maison; Sheed and Ward; 12s. 6d.

It may be a pity that Sheed and Ward have published this delightful book as a rather expensive 'paperback'. I think many people must have it firmly fixed in their heads that paperbacks are by nature cheap, while stiff covers have a certain *cachet* still which it is worth forking out for. Perhaps for this reason the book has received rather scanty attention from serious-minded publications which ought to know better. No doubt there are other reasons too: it takes religion (of a kind other than that associated with the name of Mr Graham Greene) seriously; it takes Victorian novels seriously; it takes *Victorians* seriously. Possibly worse still, seriously is never solemnly. The chapter titles alone witness to the sympathy but also the frequently amused detachment with which Dr Maison approaches her subject: The Tragedy of Unbelief; Escape to Happiness; Rest in the Church: Cautionary Tales for Higher Anglicans; Christianity Muscular and Elastic: the Broad Church Novels.

The multitude of novels described so vividly by Dr Maison should certainly do much to modify the view that Victorian religion was essentially one of conventional conformity; a view in any case held less, I think, by the younger generations who are reacting (so my elders tell me) against other things than a Victorian family background. In the more distant past a number of those who did so went to the parish church because if they did not they were sought out and ultimately punished; in the last century a number of those who did so went to church because it was the thing to do; it is equally the thing to do today to stay away from church—the social pressure on the individual can be strong. What were and are the proportions in each case, who shall say? But religion lives just the same; and how these Victorians cared about it! And how well so many of them wrote; not manipulating their characters like puppets—or case histories, but letting them breathe and speak.

The 'blurb' says: 'It is a weird and fascinating sidetrack in England's literary history'; 'fascinating', yes, though 'sidetrack' seems unnecessarily pejorative, and certainly not weird. The chapter on 'The Wicked Jesuit and Company' might well, indeed, seem fantastic if it were not so clearly true. Dr Maison is driven here to one of her few direct strictures: '... written by novelists who, one feels, should have known better'. In fact, it has a quite practical use; I should put this chapter straight into the hands of those Catholics (and non-Catholics who have escaped the past) who are puzzled to find that even in these days, when we are all being so strenuous about unity, too often still you 'scratch an Englishman and find an anti-Catholic'. But of course this book deserves much wider reading than that; the student (I hope) will use it, and the general reader enjoy it.

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