

THE BEGINNINGS OF 'BLACKFRIARS'

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THE editor asked me to write something about how BLACKFRIARS came into being. It was over thirty-three years ago and I am now six thousand miles away. So at this distance in time and place my task has its difficulties. I have little more than my memory to rely upon, and I feel like old Kaspar in Southey's poem sitting in the sun indulging in reminiscences, perhaps as remote to many people as the Battle of Blenheim must have seemed to little Wilhelmine and her brother Peterkin.

It was Father Bede Jarrett who decided to start the review and it must have been among the many schemes that filled his thoughts when he became Provincial at the end of the year 1916. The idea of such a review was by no means new. *The Hawkesyard Review*, which had been in existence for about twenty years, was an occasional review edited by the students at Hawkesyard and a kind of depository for their written efforts, literary, philosophical and theological. It began as a collection of manuscripts; later it appeared in typescript and finally blossomed out in the full glory of print three times a year. During Father Vincent McNabb's priorship the students were actually printing it themselves on a hand press, and printing it well enough to win the praise of experts. The *Review* provided a training ground for aspiring writers whose contributions naturally varied in style and quality: it was just a family affair and strictly for private circulation only. There was another collection of manuscripts of a different kind, produced annually by the Hawkesyard students, called *The Mince Pie*. This was in lighter vein and gave the young mind an outlet for another kind of self-expression in the form of caricatures, burlesques, satires, lampoons and all that good-humoured tomfoolery so dear to undergraduates and schoolboys and other simple and child-like people. The antics and mannerisms of members of the community were held up to harmless ridicule and, as you may guess, this display of buffoonery was sometimes feeble and crude, but occasionally reached a high

standard of humour, and some of the illustrations were excellent and are still memorable. *The Mince Pie* no doubt encouraged humility and the sweet charities of unspoiled innocence; but it had nothing directly to do with the *Hawkesyard Review* which took itself very seriously, and there may be those who will find fault with me for even mentioning the two in the same breath.

Father Bede during his student days was a regular contributor to the *Review*. I cannot remember whether he was ever actually editor, though it is likely enough. Anyhow he was a keen collaborator and it gave him an opportunity to exercise his talents and to serve a kind of literary apprenticeship in the writer's craft. Seniors like Father Vincent McNabb and Father Hugh Pope took a great interest in it and gave every support and encouragement to their younger brethren and they both frequently wrote for it themselves. In 1910 when I was editor, Father Hugh Pope wrote an article entitled, *Is it an Idle Dream?* which was a plea for founding a Dominican Theological Review. Father Hugh Pope was at the time Professor of Sacred Scripture in Rome and the article came under the notice of the Master General of the Order, Père Cormier, who wrote to the editor a congratulatory letter which seemed to applaud and encourage the idea.

Nothing was done until Father Bede Jarrett became Provincial in 1916, in the midst of the first world war. The war had already been going on much too long. It was always going to be over by Christmas; which Christmas was never specified, and so it went on and on; and the strain and uncertainty had a paralysing effect upon any new venture requiring initiative. 'When the war's over' became a lame excuse for shelving everything. The policy was: Let us get on with the war; other things can wait until it's over. Literature and the gentler arts and much else as well came to a standstill. The only new journalistic enterprises that could be entertained were such as would serve the war effort. Because of the shortage of man-power, the paper famine and the general dislocation, long-established journals were disappearing and being listed as 'missing, believed dead'. So obviously the time was not yet.

But Father Bede was not the kind of person to suspend operations and allow himself to be crippled into inactivity by a mere European war which, after all, was but an episode in the temporal order. The friar is a good soldier of Christ enlisted not just 'for the duration' but for an eternal warfare fighting sin, self and Satan—that triple alliance formed in the garden of Eden and destined to endure till the crack of doom. I don't say that Father Bede expressed himself in this grandiose manner, but it was clear that he looked ahead beyond the present storm which he knew would not last for ever. As evidence of his foresight we may adduce the fact that he purchased the site of the present Oxford Priory during the darkest days of the war when any such business transaction might be regarded as a risky speculation. It is clear that his courage was justified.

Among other projects he had in mind was the attempt to found a review. The first I heard of it was in a letter from Father Bede when I was serving as an army chaplain in France. The armistice was signed on the 11th of November, 1918, and some time after this, Father Bede wrote a brief business-like letter telling me he had bought *The Catholic Review*; that he intended to appoint me editor, and asking me to get out of the army and come home as soon as possible: details could be arranged when we met. I did not know much about *The Catholic Review* except that it was a quarterly which had been edited by Father Benedict Williamson and later by Father Henry Rope. The proposal I found attractive and apart from the delightful offer of congenial work, now that the war was over, immediate reprieve from army life was like being rescued from purgatory. So I wasted no time in trying to set in motion the machinery that demobilised army chaplains, but I only discovered that the machinery was clogged with red tape. Apparently it was as difficult to get out of the army as it had been to get into it. Let me explain. I had volunteered to serve as a chaplain quite early on, and the Provincial, Father Bede's predecessor, had given a very definite negative telling me I was too young and physically unfit. The Duke of Wellington in his Dispatches indicates six or eight and twenty as the age for an army chaplain and that was just about my age:

he adds 'efficiency, respectability and an expensive education' as things to be taken for granted, but he says nothing about physical fitness. The legend that I was a premature crock had grown up because I had had a breakdown in 1910; but thanks to St Thérèse of Lisieux and twelve months sanatorium treatment, I was afterwards quite well, thank you. With this assurance, when Father Bede became Provincial, I renewed my petition. He replied with the same reminder about my record of bad health. He said nothing about my age, efficiency, respectability or expensive education: he just clinched the matter by saying, 'Obviously you would never pass the necessary medical examination'. I was (foolishly, as I now see) insistent and importunate. Eventually Father Bede, to keep me quiet, said: 'All right, go and get examined by an army medical board, but I insist that you give them an honest account of your previous medical history, explaining that you have had T.B.'. This was his way, he must have thought, of giving me a kind, effective and final refusal. Without delaying to let the grass grow under my feet I went to Bristol and presented myself before an R.A.M.C. major, told him of my past (in the medical sense) and asked him if he could and would certify me fit for military service. After the usual chest-tapping, thumping and listening-in, he said he could find nothing wrong. 'Do you want to go to the war?' he asked. My too eager affirmative amused him and he rocked with laughter. 'Did you say you wanted to be certified?' he asked. He called through an open door to a colleague: 'Bill, come and behold a phenomenon—a bloke who wants to go to the war'. Bill, a cheerful-looking captain, came to have a look. 'What's to stop him from going if he wants to?' 'He says he has had T.B., but he shows no sign of active trouble now.' Bill said: 'He looks a fairly healthy specimen. The fresh air of the trenches will complete his cure, and anyhow the war will be over by Christmas.' They both signed a form which placed me in medical category A.1, and thus, to the amazement of the Provincial and others, I passed into the army and incidentally killed forever the illusion that I was a sort of weakling on his last legs and in the early stages of decrepitude.

That is how I got into the army. When the time came for

the reverse process I could find nowhere the counterpart of the obliging major and his easy, accommodating colleague to get me out of it. It was a tedious business, going around 'exploring avenues' and pulling strings which did not work; and I do not wish to renew the tedium here. I actually managed to get short leave and sought an interview with an important Brass Hat in the War Office. He was charming and seemed prepared to give me the world and the kingdoms thereof. When I explained how important it was that I should be immediately released from the army, he entirely agreed. He kept on saying: 'I will do all I can'. After he said this several times, he added as a kind of afterthought in the brightest possible manner: 'But I can do nothing'. I was right in drawing the obvious conclusion. He *did* do nothing. The division to which I belonged gradually melted away in the process of demobilisation and I might have been left high and dry and forgotten if I had not taken things into my own hands and got myself demobilised with the help of a friendly colonel of the Gloucestershire Regiment who signed all sorts of papers and sent me home with the last remnants of the division as if I were one of his own officers.

I was not a free man until June 1919, when I set out with all the lighthearted daring of inexperience to edit *The Catholic Review* for Father Bede. This review was defunct, and since we were not exactly reviving it but starting something else, it always seemed to me that Father Bede threw away his £40 in buying it. It was to be incorporated with *The Hawkesyard Review* and Fr Bede suggested a new name. BLACKFRIARS was immediately acclaimed an inspired choice. I remember only one person demurred—Mr Belloc, who said that he seemed to remember there was already a *Blackfriars Review* in existence and we ought to make inquiries and be sure we were not infringing on another's copyright. It could be nowhere traced and it was only years later that I found the clue to Mr Belloc's scruple when I tracked down the entirely fictitious publication called the *Blackfriars Bi-Weekly News* mentioned in the absurd context of the *Diary of a Nobody*, where Mr Charles Pooter engages in an angry correspondence with the editor because his name and his wife's were omitted from a long list of

guests at the Mansion House Ball. Pride was humbled: I was moved to stop patting myself on the back for having hit on the name BLACKFRIARS and start laughing at myself when I found the title in the Grossmiths' famous but ridiculous book.

What kind of a review was BLACKFRIARS to be? It was not to be learned or theological, nor of a specifically ecclesiastical character. It was not to be quite like *La Vie Spirituelle* or *La Vie Intellectuelle*, although it might well carry occasional articles such as those reviews publish. As a Dominican publication whose editor was appointed by the Dominican authorities it would naturally be a medium for stating the teachings, ideals, and principles of the Dominican apostolate which is summed up in the sentence, 'to state, teach and defend the truth of the Catholic faith by word of mouth and by the written and printed word'. If this gave it the character of a pulpit, it was to be remembered that it was to be an open-air pulpit which layfolk were to be invited to share, and heckling, within the limits of the game, was to be allowed. It took its Catholicism for granted and hoped to get a hearing from those among whom indifference or antipathy to Catholicism were equally taken for granted.

We published a manifesto very tersely setting forth our aim:

BLACKFRIARS was inaugurated in April 1920 by the Dominican Friars of the English Province in response to the general demand for a Review representing their traditional teaching in Religion, Philosophy, Science and Art, and its application to the needs of today.

The aim of BLACKFRIARS is to state in a form intelligible to modern readers the primitive and traditional principles of the Catholic Church, and to apply those principles to the peculiar needs of the present day.

In *Religion* BLACKFRIARS stands for the continuity of God's intimate relations with mankind, as testified in the Old and New Testaments and in the history and authority of the Catholic Church.

In *Philosophy* and *Science* BLACKFRIARS stands for the validity of human thought in *a priori* and *a posteriori* processes of reasoning and for the necessity of experience and

experiment as the groundwork of all syntheses and the test of all hypotheses.

In *Art* BLACKFRIARS upholds the relationship between the rules of human conduct and the rules of human production and the dependence of both on the End of human nature whence all Goodness, Truth and Beauty are derived.

Father Bede formed an editorial board. He invited Mr Joseph Clayton and Mr Stanley Morison to become members and besides these two there were Father Vincent McNabb and Father Luke Walker. It was not intended that this body should either own or run the paper or have any heavy responsibilities or powers of interference. They were there in an advisory capacity for consultation, somewhat analogous to the Dominican Provincial's council. They were of very considerable assistance to a new and inexperienced editor. Mr Clayton had been an editor in his old Fabian days and Mr Morison, an expert typographer, was always willing to give his advice on the printing and lay-out of the review. Our first meetings took place at Jack Straw's Castle on Hampstead Heath. (This was a romantic touch that Father Bede loved.) Our meeting was preceded by an excellent luncheon. For some reason or other (I forget whether it was always Friday) we had abstinence fare. Perhaps the fish diet was to preserve and stress the Dominican character of the proceedings. Usually the atmosphere was friendly and even convivial, but I remember once at least a storm occurred when Father Vincent McNabb had a fierce disagreement with Joe Clayton on the subject of socialism. When the editor was removed to Oxford in 1921 the meetings ceased and consultation took the form of correspondence between editor and individual members—which always seems to me an ideal way of dealing with a committee.

Those months of ship-building, so to speak, before the thing was launched were difficult. No one gave much encouragement. I remember Mr Belloc insisted that it was folly to attempt to start a Review unless I had £5,000 which I was prepared to throw away. No publisher would undertake to sponsor it. Burns and Oates allowed their name to appear on the cover and said they would accept copies on

sale or return at the usual trade rates. Every one was timid and cautious about being financially involved. It was a material, mercenary world: no one would take a risk. Where was the warrior spirit? All the unknown heroes were dead!

They had all seen these new reviews before: it would be a flash in the pan and soon disappear. Father Vincent McNabb, always stimulating, took up a martyr attitude and foretold it would probably have as brief a career as a witness to the truth as the Holy Innocents. Well, I was neither hero nor martyr; but I did not want to adopt a suicidal policy or deliberately court disaster. Rather in a mood of gloom and still metaphorically soaked with the cold water with which I had been plentifully sprayed, I went to Father Bede and said everyone seems pretty pessimistic: they all say the thing is doomed from the start and is bound to fail. Father Bede said in his cheeriest way: 'All right! Let it fail; but get it started. It can't die till it's born. I'd sooner attempt it and fail than not attempt it at all.' This was just what I needed and a most welcome change from the croakings of the Job's comforters who had been so vocal and so unanimous. There was no one like Father Bede and I don't think I have ever known another with quite the same gift of inspiring courage and confidence. His sane goodness, his common-sense hold on the only real things gave him his serene strength and a kind of grace to radiate the right kind of assurance. God was his centre as he was the centre of all things. Success and failure only mattered in so far as they were dependent on the divine will. So go ahead and leave the rest to God. Father Bede's confident backing of the venture meant everything as far as I was concerned; he was a great inspiration and even at this distance of time he still haunts my memory like a living presence.

It was necessary to find a printer. Trade union conditions in our capitalist society have made printing rather an expensive luxury. Now for some years the students at Hawkesyard had been printing their *Review* themselves on a hand press. They had been trained by Mr Hilary Pepler of St Dominic's Press, Ditchling, and had learned their lessons very well. So why not have our own printing press? We could emanci-

pate ourselves from the industrially organised craftsman, give a new meaning to work as something not just done for a wage, achieve economic independence, if we printed BLACKFRIARS ourselves. The Hawkesyard students had proved that printing involves no great mystery or difficulty and a couple of laybrothers could soon learn the necessary tricks.

Father Bede listened patiently and sympathetically, but was obliged to admit he had no laybrothers to spare and the beautiful scheme could not be carried out. St Dominic's Press, Ditchling, would have been willing to print for us if it had not seemed that with their hand press and hand-made paper they were unable to cope with the demand for a review of sixty-four pages, regularly each month and with a possible circulation of 2,000 copies.

We were obliged to put aside these too idealistic dreams and seek a printer committed to the modern system: and so it has been from that day to this.

Mr Eric Gill designed the cover and the first number appeared in April 1920. It would be an exaggeration to say that BLACKFRIARS was conceived in anguish and brought forth in travail. Still, there had been pangs and there was the corresponding parental pride and joy at the sight of the firstborn. But joy was soon to be mingled with sorrow when the bantling began to give trouble. As early as the fourth number an article by Father Vincent McNabb on the Lambeth Conference aroused attention. Bishop Gore preached a sermon with a copy of BLACKFRIARS in his hand and recommended it to the attention of his hearers. The sermon was reported at length with quotations from BLACKFRIARS in *The Church Times* and the review was given a free advertisement and we sold out the whole issue within a week. The priest who had baptised me felt his position with regard to his neophyte so acutely that he sent the July BLACKFRIARS to the Holy Office in Rome for censure. (I remember Father Bede's amusement and his remark that he who had opened the door of faith for me was now giving me more cold water.) The Holy Office referred the matter back to the Dominican Father General and asked him to deal with it. Cardinal Bourne was involved and he recom-

mended that something should be printed by way of explanation in the forthcoming number of BLACKFRIARS which he could appeal to in our defence should there be need to do so through any action on the part of the authorities in Rome. Cardinal Gasquet was in England at the time and it was said that he was annoyed about the article. Cardinal Bourne suggested our getting into touch with him and asking his advice. I called on him at the Jermyn Court Hotel on the eve of his departure for Rome. When I introduced myself as the editor of BLACKFRIARS, His Eminence gave me the impression (if I may say so with all due respect) of being a bit crusty and it was clear that he was very much annoyed by the article in question which he had taken the trouble to read carefully. When I told him that the article had already been denounced to the Holy Office and been dealt with and handed to the Dominican authorities in Rome, he changed his tone. He said he would not recommend the printing of any explanation in a future issue, which would only tend to open up the affair and draw attention to it. He said if the Holy Office has once given a decision it is unlikely to reopen the affair and you will probably hear no more about it. Then he became really friendly and said words to this effect: 'If you should have any further trouble, you can quote me and say you asked my advice and acted upon it'. It was very delightful and very gracious of the Cardinal to take our responsibilities upon himself.

Father Vincent McNabb in tones of indignant injured innocence asked what was his precise offence. How could he amend unless he knew that? I quoted the Master General's letter which said that his words were considered to be too conciliatory towards heresy. Twenty years or so later Cardinal Hinsley was to make statements very much in the same strain as Father Vincent; but it was always Fr Vincent's way—for all that he was regarded as a throw-back from the middle ages—to be too much ahead of the times.

The consequence of this drama was the appointment of theological censors to keep the editor in order. My fear that they would be a combination of St Paul's thorn in the flesh, the buffeting angel and a pain in the neck were not justified. When you have a theological censor whom you can talk to,

argue with and contradict—even though he was as positive and downright a character as Father Luke Walker—you feel happier than having some peevish heresy-hunter denouncing you to the authorities behind your back.

Father Bede always took a personal interest in BLACKFRIARS. 'You see', he wrote in a letter, 'I do not edit the Review. I have not the time nor the necessary gifts; but I keep my eye on it and report each month on its contents so as to play the part of a kind of Northcliffe.' In these monthly letters he was always suggesting new writers he had discovered and proposing suitable subjects and suitable methods for dealing with them. 'You know', he told a friend in a letter on the 10th August, 1920, 'I've tried hard to get someone to defend the present economic system and can get no one. A man has written something for September, but I'm told it isn't attractive.' He was scrupulously careful not to assume the editorial position he had assigned to me. His repeated exhortation to the editor was, *Be actual*. I have only been able to discover one of these letters. It is dated September 24, 1926, and was written in the train to Manchester. He says: 'I think you need to edit BLACKFRIARS more. . . . I think what it lacks still is actuality. It doesn't enough deal with the things of the present month, for I've come to the conclusion that Catholics go to their reviews, etc., for munitions in the warfare of conversation at meal times with those outside the Church. They like to be provided with ideas, reasons and proofs, which they can fire off at their friends and defend the Catholic position in various parts of the world or in various sciences, or to be able to explain any Catholic matter of interest. Thus, for the Strike, you could have got a Catholic miner to say *why* he wanted the national agreement and a Catholic owner to say *why* he didn't. People seldom get the reasons for things put clearly, and I think they want reasons set out, if only to be able to demolish them. But the Editor must look out ahead and collect papers. . . . No doubt you'd agree to all this, but find it hard to get it. But get clear and true articles on the actual topics and never mind the "names". I should have a few "names" from time to time—Frank Moran on Boxing, for example—I mean it!—But it's *help* people want and not

"names". Bolshevism or Communism by some Catholic Communist would be interesting. . . . A single number on the Coal Strike would be good, from all points of view *with* facts. I'm a believer in these single numbers. They'll have a perpetual sale.'

About the same date he writes in a letter to Mr Joseph Clayton: 'I see poor *G.K.'s Weekly* seems to be near its final end. I think BLACKFRIARS is in much the same condition. Indeed all Catholic magazines on both sides of the Atlantic are financially insolvent. Let's hope they fulfil your policy of trading for service since they make little profit. I don't find books paying either. Sermons do really bring in some good—"Small profits, quick returns".'

I think Father Bede's idea of giving a welcome to all comers and dealing with all subjects tended to give the review the character of a 'lucky bag'—as someone described it; but even a lucky bag is a unity, and quite acceptable if it yields up prizes every time.

One of the greatest joys of those happy years of editing was the discovery of a host of friends. There was Tom O'Connor, prince of sub-editors, whom Father Bede used to describe as the meekest Irishman alive. He did more for BLACKFRIARS than anyone else I can remember. Mrs Helen Parry Eden, whose criticisms were always constructive and stimulating, never failed in her real friendly interest. She did more for BLACKFRIARS than she ever knew. Basil Blackwell was an ideal publisher who helped us in very difficult times with more consideration for us than for himself. These are the names that stand out among many, many others without whom a beginning could not have been made. In twelve years of editorship many people may have been annoyed and made angry; but no enemies were made—only a great crowd of friends who remain friends, some of them still in the land of the living, others with whom friendship has been sealed and signed with eternity.