

Reviews

JOHN DONNE: MAN OF FLESH AND SPIRIT by David L. Edwards.
Continuum, London and New York, 2001. Pp. xiv + 368. £20.00 hbk.

John Donne (1572–1631), the poet who first used the word ‘sex’ in its modern meaning (separation and attraction in the heterosexual relationship), originator of sayings such as ‘Death, be not proud’ and ‘No man is an island’, earliest defender of suicide in the modern times, Anglican Dean of St Paul’s, and preacher for King James’s funeral, has attracted at least twenty biographers. The first was his parishioner Izaak Walton, of *The Compleat Angler* renown. The most recent is David L. Edwards, retired Provost of Southwark Cathedral, former Dean of King’s College, Cambridge, a Canon of Westminster Abbey, and Speaker’s Chaplain in the House of Commons.

David Edwards, who, beyond his record as an author on church history, Anglican theology, the concept of death, and other subjects, is a preacher. He has written, he claims, ‘the first book about Donne ever to have been written by a man who has preached often in London, as he did’ (p. viii).

This is not a book for specialists. He has, however, absorbed the numerous studies on Donne, as the extensive bibliography at the end of this volume attests. For details of Donne’s life he has relied primarily on R. C. Bald’s large biography (2nd edition, 1986). He concedes that ‘North American scholars have excelled in Donnean studies’ (p. 352) though ‘British scholarship has not been completely dwarfed’ (p. 355).

The subtitle — ‘Man of flesh and Spirit’ — echoes the paradoxes that many readers of Donne’s life and writings have discovered. T. S. Eliot in 1926 on the horizon of what might be called the Donne craze asserted, ‘He (Donne) has many means of appeal, and appeals to many temperaments and minds, and among others, those capable of a certain wantonness of spirit’. Edwards wishes to rescue Donne from the ‘New Critics’ who considered the poems as objects to be analysed and the newer critics who wish to connect Donne with psychoanalysis or feminism or sociology. He wants modern readers to see that ‘he is a man not of words only but also of flesh and spirit’ — like us in his humanity.

The book has three parts. The first comprising four chapters deals with Donne’s life. His ancestry through his mother is traced to St Thomas More; his mother maintained her Catholic beliefs all of her life, and the Catholic allegiances of her second and third husbands were known. After periods of study in Oxford and Cambridge without taking degrees (Edwards follows Walton in including both universities), Donne

embarked on journeys on the continent around the time of the Spanish Armada of 1588 or shortly thereafter. Then followed the period of the study of law in Lincoln's Inn, the decade of a life of youthful experimentation in the 1590s, his participation in the military-naval expeditions with the Earl of Essex in 1596 and 1597.

Donne's marriage to Anne More (no relation to the Sir Thomas line) with the consequent frustration of his hopes for diplomatic or secular employment is well known. For Edwards Donne's ordination as deacon and priest of the Anglican Church in 1615 is most important though 'Donne never cut himself off from the Catholic spiritual tradition' (p.167). Incidentally Edwards notes that the 'La Corona' sequence reflects the popularity of this form stressed by the Dominicans.

The second part contains two chapters. One entitled 'Thou hast not done', summarizes certain views, such as those held by critics who find in Donne's erotic poems excessive (according to Edwards) strands of theology that emerged in his sermons or the interpretation that he 'was more or less sick in mind' (p. 138). The other chapter, 'Deare honestie', offers Edwards' caustic denunciation of critics such as John Carey, Neil Rhodes, and Paul Oliver who accuse Donne of lacking honesty in preaching and praying.

The heart of the book, the third part, carries the under-title 'Donne Speaks'. The focus is first on the poems, then on the sermons Edwards succinctly categorizes the poems as follows: '... the poems which advocated sexual promiscuity were written before his marriage, the poems which reflected a great confusion and unhappiness in his feelings about religion were written before his ordination and the poems which sound as if they were inspired by a marriage were not written by a bachelor or an adulterer' (p.196). Some readers may object to this neat equation between words and life. However, this union lays the setting for the final fifty-one pages of the book entitled *The Trumpet*'.

Here Edwards makes his strongest stand in interpreting Donne. More than a million words in 160 of his sermons have survived. Donne held a medieval attitude towards interpreting the Bible literally. ('The preacher felt that he was standing in line with the Fathers of the Church as he preached from the divinely dictated Bible, and he was sure of his authority to speak so' [p.307]). A favourite author was St Augustine, whose spiritual pilgrimage, according to Walton, paralleled Donne's. Donne often referred to his sinfulness as well as the sinful nature of his auditory. The cross of Christ and His resurrection gave Donne, who was throughout his life obsessed with death, the confidence that, as Edwards says, though 'death is deepest darkness — God's love shines through it' (p. 348).

This book will not satisfy readers whose ears itch for novelty. It will introduce Donne as a person touched with our infirmities and yet conscious of standing on the edge of eternity in God's sight.

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