

REVIEWS

TWO WORLDS. AN EDINBURGH JEWISH CHILDHOOD. By David Daiches. (Macmillan; 15s.)

'The fairest and justest of all nations'—this is how Rabbi Salis Daiches described England in 1916, during his tenure of the rabbinate of the Sunderland Hebrew congregation. It was not false rhetoric. Rabbi Daiches, who is the hero of this book by his son, was the embodiment of the desire to live in two worlds at one and the same time. When he moved to Scotland, the worlds were not as far apart as might be supposed, not so far apart, for instance—*pace* the Lord Mayor of Dublin—as the Jewish-Irish worlds of David Marcus's *To Next Year in Jerusalem*. In both backgrounds, Jewish and Scottish, was the love of learning, of the law (the author's brother is a well-known barrister) and of religion, particularly its more legalistic aspects. To the Presbyterian Scots, the Jews were simply the People of the Book, and antisemitism, as it occurs in those English towns with sizeable Jewish communities, seems to have been refreshingly non-existent in Edinburgh.

One of the likeable things in Mr Daiches's account is the evident tolerance, both in the eyes of its neighbours and in the eyes of the Jewish community itself, of wide variations in social behaviour, from those eager to be absorbed in the larger unity to those who clung to older continental mannerisms of speech and custom. Most interesting of these were the inimitable 'trebblers' who give this book a humorous note required by its occasional ponderousness. The 'trebblers' were pedlars of thread and trinkets who travelled the Forfar coast in sufficient numbers to keep for themselves a railway compartment in which they would rock to and fro in prayer on the way to Dundee. They had a dialect of their own, an almost unbelievable variety of Yiddish which the author calls Scots-Yiddish. 'Aye, man', one 'trebbler' would say to another, 'ich hob getrebbelt mit de five o'clock train'. 'Vot time's yer barmitzvie, laddie?' Mr Daiches was once asked. 'Ye'll hae a drap o' bramfen (whisky). It's Dzon Beck. Ye ken: "Nem a schmeck fun Dzon Beck." . . . "Take a peg of John Begg.'

Rich in character as these uninhibited commercials were, their life was not that desired for his congregation by Rabbi Daiches, conscious of his position as the representative of Jewry in Scotland and always making an effort in his own person to come to terms with the new diasporal condition. In fact we see the process of this coming to terms over three generations—the almost feudal grandfather from Lithuania, unremittingly orthodox and a world-renowned Talmudic scholar,

who nevertheless sent his sons across the border to a *gymnasium* in East Prussia; one of these sons, the author's father, going on from there to the universities of Berlin and Leipzig, shunning the Yiddish of his youth as a reminder of the ghetto past, and discouraging its use among his sons; and for them, the final remove, represented by George Watson's Academy and later a brilliant place in academic and public life. Gifted they undoubtedly were, and their father had a natural pride in them, but Mr Daiches does not gloss over the expected sadness of the break with parental orthodoxy in student days at Edinburgh University. It is when we reach Mr Daiches's fully adult world at the book's end, with its mixed marriage and its departure for America, that the story is tragically complete. Yet his father's grief over the marriage, briefly and movingly told, is really an illogical one. Once the break with the old order had come in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it was only a question of time before the assaults of the outer society sapped a community in which social customs and religion were so closely linked that the loss of the one often led to the loss of the other.

Though he opposed Liberal Judaism, Rabbi Salis Daiches was nevertheless a product of the movement in European Jewry which gave it birth—and although he might temporarily succeed in holding an old world and a new in tension within himself, he must have realized at times that in his sons the tension would disappear—and the baby be thrown out with the bathwater. The development is a familiar one in other communities in which religion is so closely integrated with a particular social order that when the temporary structure is sapped, the religious spirit which informs it is often the first part of the whole framework to go.

One feels that Mr Daiches, soaked as he is in Biblical learning and piety, is aware of the inevitable pathos of this, but does not really regret it. When a religious tradition disintegrates, as he has told us in his *Literary Essays*, 'the poet can take refuge in elegiac introspection or he can create and discover a tradition of his own'. His book is surely this elegiac introspection: he has created no tradition of his own, but has ultimately been absorbed by another. It is perhaps symbolic of Mr Daiches's present remoteness from his father's religion and its attention to the details of observance that he has allowed the designer of his book-jacket to concoct a nine-branched *menorah*. So his vignettes of the Edinburgh Jewish world of his childhood, of the 'treblers' and their fascinating patois, are a record of a past closed once and for all. Closed definitely and for the most part dispassionately—and in a prose noticeably free from the sugary *schmalz* which disfigures a good deal of Jewish writing when it looks back upon a past more communally

bound together than the present. Mr Daiches, clearly, would never wish to revive a Yiddish tradition like that recently advocated by Mr Wolf Mankowitz. Instead, though this no doubt was not his intention, he seems to underline the choice offered to western Jewish communities by Mr Arthur Koestler in *The Trail of the Dinosaur*: Israel or assimilation. It is a crude and cruel choice, and socially not an easy one to make; but if this skilfully drawn portrait of a rabbinical family is any guide, the choice is in fact being made all the time.

LOUIS ALLEN

THE PRAYERS OF KIERKEGAARD. Edited with a new interpretation of his life and thought by Perry D. LeFevre. (University of Chicago Press; London, Cambridge University Press; 27s. 6d.)

No reader of Kierkegaard and his numerous commentators can long remain blind to the fact that all his work—philosophical, ethical, aesthetic—is primarily the work of a religious thinker, ‘of a man struggling for his own soul’, as Dr LeFevre says. The author of this study is certainly right in stressing this fact in his interpretation of Kierkegaard which follows the ninety-nine prayers (‘over one hundred’, according to the ‘blurb’) which he has selected from Kierkegaard’s writings. His insistence, however, can scarcely claim to amount to ‘a new interpretation of his life and thought’; indeed, it verges on the trite. What such an essay might much more profitably have attempted to discuss, is Kierkegaard’s place in the tradition of Christian prayer and devotion. But Dr LeFevre is content to outline—once again—the great themes of Kierkegaard’s reflection, with a last chapter in which Kierkegaard’s views on prayer are expounded.

The prayers themselves, which form the first part of the book, are well worth printing as extracts torn from their contexts. They at once illustrate many sides of Kierkegaard’s mind, and can serve to feed the Christian reader’s own devotional life. A Catholic will, of course, find many gaps, sides of Catholic devotion which are not here represented at all. But he will not find much in these prayers—soaked as they are in the Scriptures, keenly aware of the worshipping community of the faithful, and uttering a deep concern to work out his salvation in fear and trembling—that he cannot make his own. One example (No. 8, p. 13), selected almost at random must suffice:

Father in Heaven! Thou hast loved us first, help us never to forget that Thou art love so that this sure conviction might triumph in our hearts over the seduction of the world, over the inquietude of the soul, over the anxiety for the future, over the fright of the past, over the distress of the moment. But grant also that this conviction might