

Reviews

DAVID KNOWLES: A MEMOIR by Dom Adrian Morey. *Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1979 £4.95.*

The late David Knowles was a monk of Downside who, after difficulties with the abbey and the order, became the first Benedictine monk to hold a Regius chair in a British university: in his case Cambridge. The book cannot have been easy to write and is certainly not easy to review. Dom Morey knew his subject well both as fellow-monk and fellow medievalist but for a long period was divided from him by his estrangement from and hostility to Downside. Dom Morey presents a fair case. David Knowles was a difficult man whose psychological hangups plus a large dose of plain pigheadedness made it impossible for him to come to terms with Downside unless he could have his way all the time. Apart from some rather insensitive handling of the affair by Abbot Chapman whom Dom Morey does his best to present as untypical of Downside, the abbey is shown essentially as the innocent party and *Dom David's estrangement from it* as something which he, rather than it suffered for. I knew Dom Knowles only very slightly: he seemed to me to radiate chill where some people radiate warmth. To be fair I am pretty sure he did not approve of me. He did not in general approve of the cultured lower classes. In a letter written in 1969 he commented on Cambridge: "... suddenly about four years ago ... the public and grammar school code of behaviour and *Weltanschauung* was swamped by boys and girls from the endless streets and comprehensive schools of Chorlton-cum-Hardy, South Shields, Peckham and other such resorts. They often know more than we do of modern literature, art and music, and politics, but almost nothing of our deep roots of tradition." As Dom Knowles gave up listening to music and reading novels at a fairly early age and never seems to have had any interest in the visual arts, though he adored trains and had a deep knowledge of Bradshaw, we need not exaggerate the culture of the children of the endless streets. Enquiry informs me –

reliably I think – that boys and girls from comprehensive schools are infrequent in Cambridge in 1979 and were virtually unknown in 1964: it is schools like Manchester Grammar School he probably had in mind, which it may be observed, whatever its faults and they are many, has a rather longer tradition than Downside (as indeed had the quite ordinary State grammar school that I attended). There is another comment in another letter about the *Downside Review* when edited by Sebastian Moore that there was intense literary activity of all kinds and the Review "was very highbrow and notable". I do not think these comments were meant as approbation. I wrote in almost every issue of the Review at this time, mostly reviews, and it was indicated to me at the time that Professor Knowles did not approve. I am not, then, a wholly unbiased observer but much of Dom Knowles' career speaks for itself.

Dom Morey sets out the stages of Dom Knowles' problems with the monastic establishment in sober detail. His summary must suffice here: "It will have been noted that in 1932-3 his views had swung rapidly from a belief that the contemplative life could be lived at Downside in an admirable community to the view that its observance was unsatisfactory; from the project to found a monastery and school in Australia to a sudden determination to found a purely contemplative house in East Anglia. If this might seem a history of inconsistency it can be said that after 1939 he was entirely consistent in the harshness of his judgment of his former community." And Dom Morey goes on to quote a savage remark, made after his formal reconciliation with the community "... if I had anything to do with Downside as such, I would feel and feel rightly, that I had sinned against God." Bound up with this estrangement from his monastery was what Dom Morey calls "a curious but innocent relationship" between Dom David and a Swedish ex-

Lutheran psychiatrist, Elizabeth Kornerup. In the sexual sense I am sure that Dom Morey, in opposition to much academic gossip of the day, was right; the relationship was innocent. For the rest we may each judge for ourselves. Dr Kornerup, who died soon after Dom David, went to confession every day and had a confessor for every day of the week. She received the anointing of the sick regularly, whether sick in the ordinary sense or not, and she always carried with her a consecrated host. Dom Morey implies that it was her presence and her doing that made reconciliation with Downside so difficult for Dom David and on the evidence he presents he is probably right. She served his Mass. Readers of *New Blackfriars* will not be shocked at this but it must be remembered that Dom David was a bitter opponent of the liturgical reforms and one of his few theological tasks in later life was a defence of *Humanae Vitae*. In the projected popish version of Little Gidding he contemplated, he informed potential members that they must: "submit to me and me alone any decision that relates to your inner life either directly (i.e. your soul's life) or indirectly (i.e. our common future ...)" and to "seek spiritual advice from no outsider." One may add that in Dom David's *Rule* lay-brothers were an all-but essential part of the scheme: "It is fairly clear that in a present-day Benedictine house the cooking, tailoring etc. cannot be done by choir-monks." He also observed that lay-brothers would help preserve a religious atmosphere and save expense. Not, in some ways, a very nice man and certainly one who contributed to his own difficulties. But was the abbey as innocent as Dom Morey makes it out to be? I think not.

One of the points on which Dom Knowles was adamant in his criticism of Downside was the incompatibility of the school with a genuinely contemplative Benedictine abbey. This is the more telling in that he was himself an *alumnus* and always seems to have regarded his school days with fondness: "The school at Downside had its deep lovers *et in Arcadia ego* in those days" he wrote to Dom Morey at the end of his life. According to Dom Morey Dom David developed a crush on a

fellow sixth-former, which was not returned and he believes that this had "some relevance to an understanding of the man whose later development was to be so unexpected." This sort of thing is surely commonplace in adolescents and what good schools do is to help boys and girls to grow out of this emotional equivalent of pimples without any lasting effects. We are told that Dom Leander Ramsay was a great headmaster who transformed the school. He was, however, "not endowed with any special understanding of boys" and was the worst judge of character in Christendom. His greatness appears to have derived from the fact that he was a connoisseur of the English public-school tradition and began the process of making Downside into just such another school. This tradition is about status, superiority, privilege: the instillation of an inner certainty that the boys were chosen by Providence for a position of privilege to be repaid by 'service' to the community, i.e. by running it. In many ways Dom David accepted this. In 1972 he declared "I am an unrepentant elitist", but he did see that there were limits, and the formation of an elite was not really compatible with a life of contemplation according to the *Rule*. Nor is Dom Morey wholly candid about the abbey in the '20s and '30s. It is only towards the end of the book when he rebukes Dom Knowles for sticking to judgements on Downside derived from the days of his own experience many years earlier that he tacitly admits that the Downside of Abbot Chapman and Abbot Hicks was a rather different place from that of Abbot Christopher Butler and his successors. Dom Knowles did in fact leave an autobiography that no doubt gives his own side of the case. His literary executor has decided not to publish it for the present and Dom Morey had no access to it.

Dom Knowles in the event was never to have a career as a monk and monastic reformer: instead he was an enormously prestigious and influential academic. Always austere in his personal life he can never be accused of seeking the fleshpots. But it sometimes seemed that his austerity must be exercised within reach of the fleshpots; that this asceticism needed an audience: as a Cambridge don he certainly got

it. His literary output was somewhat unconventional for a don of his time. He wrote very few technical articles but a substantial range of books. He himself was modest in his claims. He wrote: "I cannot hold a candle to a Stenton or a Douglas or a Powicke or a Macfarlane – *necdum* to a Maitland – as a professional historian; I have made no important discoveries and changed no patterns." What, of course, he could do was write better than any of these, even Maitland. Any anthology of twentieth century English prose must include some of Knowles. Dom Morey quotes very freely from some of his marvellous letters about his feeling for the Somerset countryside. His great work was his voluminous history of Monasticism and the Medieval Religious Orders and it is superbly written. But it is not only style. He was lucid – his lecture on the tangled connexions between the so-called rule of the Master and that of St Benedict is a masterpiece of exposition of an appallingly complicated subject – he was elegant, he was richly emotional but never, or very, very seldom, sentimental or mawkish: above all he was always serious. He was a better 'technical' historian than he admitted – I suspect he rather cherished his amateur status. Forty years ago he published a technical article that establishes most of what there is to be established about King John's quarrel with Innocent III and his edition of Lanfranc's Monastic Constitutions leaves little to be desired. It is not simply style that explains his influence. Of the scholars he names, Powicke was no mean stylist and his late work *Henry III and the Lord Edward* contains many notable passages, Powicke was a tradition in himself. He had scores of pupils whose theses enriched – sometimes – his

pages, always scrupulously acknowledged. The culmination of his life's work was his volume in the Oxford History. It seems to me unreadable and it has certainly killed the subject stone dead. But *The Monastic Order* and *The Religious Orders* are very much alive. What Knowles did was to create a vast synthesis that could serve as a map by means of which later scholars could fill in the gaps and even radically alter the contours. Anyone interested in medieval monastic history could still easily find a life's work following up some of his themes: Knowles offered a stimulus where Powicke erected a tombstone.

He had his faults. He was much given to sitting 'in his professorial chair giving marks to men'. His character-study of Becket was a disaster in my opinion – as much a character-study of Becket as would be an essay on Tony Benn culled from the *Telegraph* and the *Mail*. In his collected *comminations*, published as a *Festschrift* under the revealing title of the *Historian and Character*, the longest is an extraordinary obituary of Cuthbert Butler. It is, I think, very unfair and it has helped eclipse what is a much more balanced survey of *Benedictine Monasticism* than can be found in Knowles' writings even if it is much duller. On the other hand his essay on Cardinal Gasquet is bitchiness raised to a fine art: but it is a just study all the same. The book concludes with a bibliography. There is the odd error. The Gasquet lecture was delivered in the university of London not the British Academy. Dom Morey notes that 'MDK contributed an essay on Becket to John Coulson's *Book of Saints* in 1969, He also wrote the lives of Dunstan and Francis of Assisi for that collection if my memory serves me rightly.

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THE EVANGELICAL ANGLICAN IDENTITY PROBLEM: AN ANALYSIS by J. I. Packer. *Latimer House, Oxford 1978. pp. 40 75p*

THE INTEGRITY OF ANGLICANISM by Stephen W. Sykes. *Mowbrays, London and Oxford 1978. pp. 117 £2.50 paperback.*

J. I. Packer doubts if any but his fellow Evangelicals will endorse his belief that the Church of England is "under judgment in these days for multiple unfaithfulness to

the gospel". Toleration of erroneous doctrine—"a licensed pluralism of belief about basics"—is making life impossible for Evangelical Anglicans. His pamphlet con-