REVIEWS

A Century of Ecclesiastical Taste

MR ANSON[1] has given us an enchanting book, which no one but he could have written. On a noble scale, in 360 pages, he allows us to share his encyclopaedic -and surely unique- -knowledge of the whole landscape of Victorian church decoration from its broad outlines to the smallest detail. But I am proud at the outset to add a tiny pebble to the cairn of Mr Anson's knowledge. After mentioning that ostrich eggs were considered appropriate decorations, he remarks: 'No Tractarian churches appear to have been furnished with symbolic ostrich eggs'. Perhaps not. But if Mr Anson, when he is next at Downside, will visit the village church, he will find ostrich eggs on the cresting of the rood-screen. They were placed there, I believe, by Abbot Horne, who had doubtless read his Durandus.

I wondered a little, before I had studied the author's drawings, whether photographs would not have been preferable. But I am wholly converted: not only because many of the subjects are difficult to photograph and may now be dispersed or destroyed, but because Mr Anson's beautifully detailed and accurate drawings make it possible to compare the subjects within a common convention. Into his drawings he introduces contemporary figures and again I antecedently inclined to demur, thinking that they might be frivolous and fearing for their accuracy. But Mr Anson is a scholar and I do not think that anyone could fault their fidelity to period. The figures serve a purpose too in stressing a point which is frequently made, but which cannot be made too often, that it is impossible to isolate architecture from the whole social structure of which it is the expression. But perhaps their greatest value is to emphasize the appropriateness of the word 'Fashion' in the title of the book. For it is brought home to us throughout the work that it is concerned with fashion, disguised (and constantly justified) as principle.

The phenomenon which Mr Anson is considering is that of a large and influential section of the English nation at the very height of its material prosperity turning its attention to the building and adornment of God's house. It may be said that the movement came too late to preserve the faith of the new proleteriat but I do not know that any other nation has a parallel achievement to show. What does come out from this book is how little 'popular' was this spate of church building and decoration—how little rooted in the people. We are taught how to look for the popular art of the last century in the mahogany and engraved glass of the public house or in the gay painting of caravan and barge. Of all this the Victorian church shows nothing. Again and again we are reminded by implication that here is an affair of scholarly architects and of clergymen who are gentlemen by background or by aspiration. This is not to deny that much of the work produced may even now exert a strong appeal. To have seen Sir Ninian Cowper's reredos in the Lady Chapel at Downside in its early freshness,

[1] *Fashions in Church Furnishings 1840-1940.* By Peter F. Anson. (The Faith Press, 50s.)

when one was oneself young, is to have experienced the illusion of a whiff of Chaucerian spring. But it is arguable, seeing that the subject considered is essentially an English and an Anglican one, whether it might not have been better to restrict the scope of this volume. This may seem ungrateful from a reader who has enjoyed every morsel of the feast and would not willingly have been denied any. But I cannot escape the feeling that such a restriction might have been an artistic gain. The drab run-of-the-mill Catholic churches (so sensitively described by Mr Anson) have really no place here. And the occasional more ambitious church is, in scientific language, a 'sport', taking the tone from a wealthy patron and fitting stylistically into a corresponding Anglican category. As Monsignor Knox reminds us in the *Spiritual Aeneid*, Catholics are accustomed to worship indifferently (and he might have added unseeingly) at Downside or at the Oratory.

What differentiates Victorian ecclesiology from the concern of other ages for the beauty of God's house is not only its archaeological but perhaps still more its doctrinaire character. When Carolines and Georgians inserted their pediments and columns into medieval churches they were swayed by fashion only. But for the last century and more fashion in Church decoration has claimed doctrinal inspiration. The mentality which led Pugin and the ecclesiologists to deride anything but 'the real thing' is none other than that which causes our contemporaries to condemn what they dislike as 'unliturgical'. The 'chancel and screen' man of the 1840s and the 'central altar' man of today are alike impervious to discussion. Aesthetically this would matter little did successive generations build their own churches and leave those of their predecessors to express and even to realize other modes of worship. But, it is objected, churches are not museums and they must follow the current mode. In the hey-day of the Gothic revival the Commissioners' churches of half-a-century earlier must be deprived of their galleries and given a Gothic look and now the many-compartmented plan of a medieval church must be adapted to serve the community worship of our egalitarian and collectivist age. The artistic havoc thus wrought has been incalculable.

Let M. R. James' account[2] of his fictitious cathedral describe the fate of many: 'It was in 1840 that the wave of the Gothic revival smote the Cathedral of Southminster. "There was a lovely lot of stuff went then, sir", said Worby, with a sigh. "My father couldn't hardly believe it when he got his orders to clear out the choir. . . . Crool it was, he used to say: all that beautiful wainscot oak, as good as the day it was put up, and garlands like of foliage and fruit. . . . All went to the timber-yard—every bit except some little pieces worked up in the Lady Chapel. . . . Well, I may be mistook, but I say our choir never looked so well since. . . . But Dean Burscough he was very set on the Gothic period, and nothing would serve him but everything must be made agreeable to that. And one morning after service . . . he'd got a roll of paper with him, and the verger that was then brought in a table, and they began spreading it out on the table with prayer-books to keep it down, and my father helped 'em, and he saw it was a picture of

[2] From *An Episode of Cathedral History*, by M. R. James.

the inside of a choir in a Cathedral; and the Dean—he was a quick-spoken gentleman—he says, 'Well, Worby, what do you think of that?' 'Why', says my father, 'I don't think I 'ave the pleasure of knowing that view. Would that be Hereford Cathedral, Mr Dean?' 'No, Worby', says the Dean, 'that's Southminster Cathedral as we hope to see it before many years.' 'Indeed, sir', says my father'." '

Poor Worby! His *cri-de-coeur* echoes through the intervening decades and is taken up by Arthur Benson in his diary sixty years later—'If only people would have faith, and keep work as long as it is careful, expensive, thought out and put up with love'. We now no longer throw out cherubs and swags, but Dean Burscough is still active. We have seen the war-damaged remains of Bodley's work at St Paul's cast out with delight, only this year the reredos in Great St Mary's has been destroyed, and I fear that not all the thought and care (and I doubt not expense) which Westcott and Holt lavished on the mural decorations in Trinity chapel will secure their preservation. And amongst us I do not think that a 'Benediction' altar has a very good prospect of survival.

It is curious to reflect, amidst all the changes dictated by fashion, how little thought has been given to basic principles. In the long centuries of Christian church building, how very few people have ever set themselves seriously to consider the ideal size of a church and the effect of different dimensions on forms of worship. I can call to mind only Sir Christopher Wren. His perspicacious paper on 'The Auditory Church', for all that he avowedly had quite another aim to that which he attributed to Catholic architects of his own age, is one which we should do well to read and ponder. For, believing that the services of the Reformed Church were intended to be audible and intelligible to all the worshippers, he concludes that this is possible for a congregation of a thousand at most, of which a large part is to be accommodated in galleries. Now that we are catching up with the Reformers in this respect, we do well to remember that spoken participation in the liturgy can set limits to the size and disposition of a congregation, unless indeed mechanical means be used which themselves tend to diminish the sense of intimacy and community. With a sung Mass the case is altered, as anyone knows who has witnessed a celebration in the *piazza* of St Peter's or at Lourdes.

If little thought has been given to the audibility of worship, still less discriminating attention has been given to its visibility. Nowadays the all-seeing principle has triumphed. Anyone who is privileged to take visitors to see King's College Chapel must steel himself to hear one in three (almost before his foot is well inside the chapel) regret the presence of the screen. Pugin appears to have been defeated all along the line. And yet only a few weeks ago there was a letter in *The Times* which suggested, against all present probability, that even in this matter we might expect a swing of the pendulum. The Rev. F. P. Hughes, Canon of Chichester, wrote that 'in all normal people, beneath the surface levels of life, there is a deep need of finding in our churches at least some suggestion of the infinite wonder of God and the wonder of being permitted to approach his presence. Dr Otto's great

work on the importance of the numinous in religion has surely a message for the present day.' No less surely at a time when the thought of Christians becomes more ecumenical should we remember that great tradition, no less august than our own, which has remained faithful to the ikonostasis.

It is a tribute to Mr Anson's book that it stimulates thought about matters which it does not set out to treat. One cannot write about ecclesiastical art—or even ecclesiastical fashion—without impinging on theology. Is it fanciful to suggest that in these two streams—the screened and secret and the all-seeing and all-hearing—we have an example of man trying to give expression to the mystery of the Incarnation? At one period he will be seized with the Divinity of Christ. His representations of our Lord will be awful, his worship remote and hieratic. At another the humanity of Christ will possess him and he will represent Christ as a child in the arms of his Mother or as the Man of Sorrows, will worship him in the crib and accompany him on the road to Calvary. A. N. GILBEY

PEOPLE, SPACE, FOOD. By Arthur McCormack. (Sheed and Ward; 9s.)

In this age the man in the street is more often than not hypnotized by the *soi-disant* infallibility of the scientist ('exact' and 'science' seem to be associated in the popular mind) and impressed by his hubris. Unfortunately in the matter of population statistics, agronomics and demographics one finds ample proof of the definition of a specialist being one who knows more and more about less and less. Malthus was the first, in modern times, to start a population scare and Fr McCormack in this useful book does well to recall how many have followed in his footsteps. The President of the British Association in 1896, Sir William Crookes, warned that in thirty years the world population would have disastrously outrun the food supply. He was fantastically wrong. The prime lesson to learn from this, and from more recent Cassandras, is not to be stampeded There *is* a population explosion, and there is a very complicated problem to be solved. The moral solution must always be the right one, and so one must view with some suspicion the pessimists who paint a dark picture and show birth-control by artificial means as the only ray of light.

At the other extreme are the optimists, such as Mr Colin Clark. He is not concerned with figures of the growth of world population, but with the possible world resources. In a recent fascinating and compelling study (*World Justice*, I, 1, pp. 35–55) he has shown that the world's land area of 131 million square kilometres (excluding Greenland and Antarctica) could yield as much produce as 77 million square kilometres of temperate European farmland. In other words the world could provide food, fibre and all other agricultural requirements for 28 billion people, ten times the present world population. Fr McCormack spells this out, with ample references to the reports of FAO and WHO, but one sentence from a report of the former presents the central problem: 'There are vast potential resources which science and capital could capture for agricultural production'. And the trouble is that neither the science nor the capital is where it is most needed, in the under-developed countries. After chapters dealing with 'more