

ous attempt of Cardinal Vaughan to acquire from France some bogus relics of St Edmund, King and Martyr, for Westminster

Cathedral. The episode is fully described in Snead-Cox's biography of Vaughan.

ALEC VIDLER

#### VIEWPOINTS: POETS IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN HAFFENDEN.

*Faber & Faber, 1981. pp 189. £7.50.*

Enterprises of this kind are hazardous. Happily, Haffenden never loses sight of the possibility of sounding merely silly or portentous, and for most of the time at least keeps himself out of trouble. The dust-jacket blurb speaks of the poets "tempting the taboo against self-consciousness", and in most of the interviews Haffenden overtly challenges his men (there are no women) on the dangers of the sort of self-consciousness in which he is encouraging them. All agree that it is something to be avoided. Few writers in fact talk well about their own work and risk destroying their spontaneity for no commensurate rewards. It does not save the situation here simply to remind them of the dangers. Much of the talk makes poor reading, and it is all a good deal less illuminating than it is claimed to be: "Their views and reflections offer the reader unique insights into the poetic impulse, its art and craft, not explaining but exploring". This kind of imprecision augurs ill; "unique" does not mean enough here, and the "art" (and the "craft") of "the poetic impulse" is mere vagueness. In the event, however, the book is a good deal better than this promises.

Some of Haffenden's poets survive unscathed; interestingly, these are the best. Heaney has a kind of bluff but genuine humility which allows his wisdom to speak freely, and the book is worth buying almost for this one interview. He nevertheless observes:

I think that it's a very, very delicate matter for a writer – how to conceive and perceive himself, to what extent self-consciousness, self-knowledge, self-criticism, self-exposure, should be mixed or meshed; to what extent in an interview like this you should tell how much you know. You have to preserve

a cellarful of life of your own. (p 62)

Heaney speaks with easy assurance about matters involving fine judgment of poetry, where most of the others strive clumsily and in vain. In his case, it is possible to believe that genuine insights are being offered, as when he speaks of the pleasure of a poem being "in the rustle of the language itself". Larkin for many years wisely declined interviews, waiting till he could speak with an authority he could himself believe in. Even yet, he confines himself, and many readers will feel some disappointment with his contribution, the value of which lies chiefly in the revelation of background information. This must in each case interest some readers more than others. I was fascinated to discover that "At Grass" in fact describes Brown Jack; not surprised to find that he gets "endless trouble about 'Dry-Point.'"; relieved to find that he does not like "An Arundel Tomb" much and is prepared to say why. But the professional humility of his declaration that "The Whitsun Weddings" was "just there to be written down.... Anybody could have done it" is mildly offensive, like the calculatedly understated conclusion: "One does one's best, and lets the result stand or fall by itself". But most of it is pleasingly anecdotal, affording that kind of insight.

The difference between the Heaney and Larkin interviews may be further defined by saying that those who do not know Heaney's work will almost certainly be sent in search of it by reading what he had to say in response to Haffenden's promptings. The Larkin interview could mean much only to someone already closely familiar with his poems. Different from both, very regrettably, is the interview with Kinsella, who comes across

as pretentious and vain, and often incoherent. I should prefer to believe he really is not like this, but the interview will not induce anyone to go and read his beautiful poetry, about which it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that nothing is revealed. So with Geoffrey Hill, whose carefully prepared answers are miniature lectures, absurdly pompous and entirely unhelpful. Tom Gunn's interview commences engagingly, but he succumbs to the obvious temptations, despite his awareness of them, and the spark soon goes out. Douglas Dunn comes across disappointingly compared with Tom Paulin, whose aggressiveness is better controlled and does not get in the way, as Dunn's does. "Does indignation possess you" asks Haffenden, "as much as – or more than – any other emotion?" This elicits the reply: "I don't think it's indignation: it's a combination of affront and also of resignation". Much of the Dunn interview is on this level; most of Paulin's is far above it, though he has an irritating habit of simply stepping round the question, and Haffenden has a rather frustrating time of it, as he does with Craig

Raine. Richard Murphy often fails to see the question, and never seems fully engaged; but then he describes himself as an austere epicurean, and that must lend him a certain uniqueness. He does not bring out the best in Haffenden, whose questions tend to be over-elaborate or just badly worded: the strain tells. Haffenden is not at his best with Muldoon either, but the poet comes across better than Murphy.

There is a moment in the Larkin interview in which the poet modestly eschews greatness: "If I seem good, it's because everyone else is so bad" (p 119). It is perhaps a limitation of this book that it does not sufficiently challenge the arrogance of that assertion. However, it is, ultimately, Haffenden's book, and his intelligence and discernment that make it interesting, sometimes in spite of the poets. They get a bit of doubtful publicity, but the reader of contemporary poetry is given a lesson on what sort of questions he ought to be asking his poets; and perhaps it is those glimpses which are, eventually, of most value.

FRANK McCOMBIE

#### **AN APPROACH TO CHRISTIANITY by Bishop Christopher Butler.**

*Collins 1981 pp 300 £2.95.*

This is a straightforward and fairly traditional essay in Christian apologetics. It is clearly written in a personal and readable style. It manages to avoid being technical without becoming superficial. Some repetition might have been avoided without loss of clarity to the argument, but in general the form and balance of the book are well conceived and executed.

It begins with making out the case for acknowledging the reality of God, or as Butler prefers to say in view of the widespread misunderstanding of the word 'God', the Absolute Mystery. The argument is well and, in my judgment, cogently conducted. But I am unhappy about

the *kind* of cogency that is claimed for such a process of reasoning. I do not think it can properly be called 'conclusive' (p 138), nor can I accept that 'philosophy can convey certainty of the reality of the Absolute Mystery which we call God' (p 280). Does such a claim do justice to the continuing struggle of faith in face of the world's evil? The analysis that Butler uses in his discussion of evil – the headmaster who takes the risk that there will be bullying in his school and the oarsman who accepts the discomfort involved in a university boat race (pp 134-5) – may have some analogical value, but there is a measured urbanity about their presentation