

BIOGRAPHY OF FATHER BEDE
JARRETT (II)¹

THE Order of Preachers enjoys an old-established reputation for learning. There is nothing to show that this was the cause of Cyril Jarrett's first attraction to Dominican life; but once he realised that the Dominican ideal invites every Friar Preacher to be a saint, and all who can to be scholars, he made saintly scholarship the object of his very ardent ambition.

His record at school and his experience of himself as a student more than justified such an aspiration. He was docile to the teaching of masters and books. All the masters under whom he ever sat have testified with one voice that he was one of the most industrious and intelligent pupils that passed through their hands.

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The course of study he had to follow at Woodchester and Hawkesyard was strictly ordered as a preparation for the ecclesiastical and religious state. It included logic, scholastic philosophy and speculative theology. He applied himself diligently to these subjects, passed his examination in them with conspicuous success, and was able to turn them all to good account in later life. To the discipline of logic especially he yielded himself with unquestioning faith and a rare obedience. It strengthened his methodical habits of clear, accurate thinking, speech and writing. About the time he made his solemn vows, and for some years afterwards—years during which he was very consciously forming his character in force and freedom—he indulged in much speculative enquiry into the psycho-

¹ A second selection of extracts from the forthcoming *Life of Father Bede Jarrett* by Rev. J.-B. Reeves, O.P.

logy of the human will. His researches into this problem took him beyond his text-books; and he supplemented his reading by his own written reflections. This was in accordance with his habit of making and keeping notes of whatever in his reading impressed him deeply.

His personal library was at all times a very small one; more than half of it consisted of an admirably organized collection of note-books which he had begun as a young student and built up ever afterwards. It was this consistent practice, from schooldays onwards, to use at first only the right-hand page of a new manuscript book, leaving the opposite one to be filled in later or for corrections of the original matter. In their final form these note-books are a fascinating testimony to the steady unfaltering growth of his mind and character. He never lost touch with his first beginnings, proceeded directly from them to a maturity that recalls the Psalmist's *Beatus Vir*: 'He shall be like a tree that is planted near the running waters, which shall bring forth fruit in due season; and his leaf shall not fall off, and whatsoever he shall do shall prosper.'

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Various influences went to form the mind and character that distinguished him in full manhood, but the strongest of all, and the one that determined the rest, was his own will, dedicated to high purpose from youth. Nature, his family and his early schooling had given him, or fostered in him, a simple straightforward enthusiasm for goodness in all its hierarchies, natural and supernatural. Faith, obedience, and love of discipline already shone in him when he left school. Monastic rules confirmed and refined these traits, and scholastic exercises moulded his mind to traditional Dominican agility and suppleness. Under the Dominican ensign 'Veritas' he enlisted formally in the service of truth, which was to be first possessed by his own contemplation of it, then communicated to others by preaching and teaching. It was his strong, simple zeal

for this Dominican way through contemplation to action that determined his whole career and gave it distinction.

He made a supreme personal contribution to his own formation by strenuously dedicating himself to goodness pure and simple; he served it, first by an ascetic self-discipline, then by diffusing goodness all round him in shy but courageous love of all others. It was this whole-hearted devotion to the best that from the beginning marked him out amongst his religious brethren. In him there was something over and above the common run of fidelity to the obligations of religion. He spoke and evidently thought of his zeal for perfection as his plain duty, but he loved duty chivalrously and never groaned under it.

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As a trained Dominican he was nowise different from any other typical Dominican. What made him eminent amongst his brethren was the extraordinary readiness and naturalness with which he surrendered himself to be trained, preserving throughout the process his own strong, distinctive human character. All through his training this character was asserting itself, accepting what was proven and admitted good, at first resisting and later ignoring what was confessed second-rate, and deliberately choosing, wherever choice was patently his right or his privilege, the lines of personal progress most suited to his state and talents.

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He had a very exceptional gift of faith, natural and supernatural. Once he had pledged his heart or his word to anyone or anything, his gift was beyond his recall: he went on giving to the uttermost. He learned to say 'Perfect living is perfect giving.' Few men can ever have been as unswervingly loyal to first faith as he. This unhesitating joyous fidelity was the secret not only of his rare moral integrity, but also of a success in intellectual pursuits which to many seemed almost beyond his gifts.

His faith was first in God, in Jesus Christ, in the Church, the Pope, the Sacraments, the traditional teaching and discipline of the Dominican Order. Bound up within this supernatural faith, and inspiring all his human interests, was a romantically optimistic natural faith in his fellow men, in his family, in his country, all civilization, all good traditions and customs; in his brethren, friends and acquaintances; and, most especially, an unbounded faith in the unspoilt and innocent young. Not that no good person or thing was ever alien or foreign to his sympathy. Many were, though far less at the end of his life than at the beginning. He was entirely at home only in the secular society in which he was born and bred, and in the Christian society in which by his baptism he owned himself to have been born again. In the degree in which persons or things were strangers to his society, in that degree precisely his heart and mind were shy of them. Though he was no crabbed conservative but most courteously liberal, he had a notable proclivity to distrust outsiders and foreigners. Hence he had none of the rebellious tendencies that tempt youth to 'go native,' to disbelieve every friend and to believe every stranger, to refuse charity at home and to be prodigal of it abroad. Even so his mind was more open than his will to such extravagances. If he were led into personal contact with anyone erring from the straight and orthodox course he himself preferred, he would sympathise, especially with the person, but also with the error, in hope of disengaging some root of truth and goodness from it.

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Among the lives of saintly Dominicans put in his way for edification, one was the work of a real historian. It was the *Life of Philip Thomas Howard*, one of the most illustrious members of the English Province since the Reformation. The biographer was Father Raymond Palmer, a scholar whose work had earned the recognition of spe-

cialists before he became a Dominican. He was still alive when Brother Bede joined the Order, and when he died the latter immediately became his recognised successor as historian of the Province. The first ambitious attempt at a historical monograph to which his example inspired the younger man was a short popular *Life of Cardinal Howard*, which Brother Bede finished in April 1903, and published as a pamphlet with the Catholic Truth Society in October 1905. It reads as freshly to-day as when it first appeared, and for the biography of its author it has the added interest of showing upon what living and dead models the young writer was deliberately forming himself.

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A few months before the inauguration of lectures in ecclesiastical history (at Hawkesyard) Brother Bede had written in the *Hawkesyard Magazine* an article on a point of Dominican history which he had worked out in his free time and from his own private researches. It was his first excursion into print, and he would have liked a competent criticism of it. Father Palmer was now dead, so the Editor of the magazine submitted the manuscript to Father Vincent McNabb, who had taught Brother Bede at Woodchester.

'Your article,' wrote Father McNabb to Brother Bede, 'is a great consolation. The choice of subject is one that rejoices my heart. You have a taste for the right matter. You will never spend your time over copies and second-hand material when you can finger originals and first-hand material. Then, too, it makes my old throat lumpy to see how you can go so instinctively to our dear Order, the foster-mother who has done so much for us.

'I think your imagination is of the sort that will make you a historian. It carries you on without carrying you away. You can divine the motives and causes of events. You can predict what other events must have led up to or followed upon the subject of your sketch. You can not

only compile but discover. *Be original. Be reverential. Be humble—humble—humble.* I like your style of English. It will mature and mellow as time goes on. But for the moment it is clear, sober and fitting. It serves as an invisible glass through which your story is seen. You need to keep on adding to its simplicity and even its concentration. Let your thoughts be deep and your words cannot be shallow . . .

'You have gone beyond me now. I can only follow you with my hopes, good wishes and prayers.

'May St. Thomas and Venerable Bede be your models and masters.'

Father Bede treasured this letter until he died. On October 14th, 1902, four days after it was written, he set to work on a new exercise book of 'Notes on English History.' On the title page he inscribed two quotations:

'Leo XIII: 'The first law of history is not to lie: the second is not to fear to tell the truth.'

Jessop: 'What is history but the science which teaches us to see the throbbing life of the present in the throbbing life of the past.'

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The quotations from Leo XIII and Jessop with which he prefaces this revision of English history are evidence of the maturing intelligence with which he was at this stage viewing his favourite subject of study. The question, What is History? is now in his thoughts, and he has been turning to other minds for an answer to it. These two answers occur in a list which he had already compiled from his general reading. The list opens with a long extract from an article by Lord Acton in the *Nineteenth Century* for October 1895. Acton recommends the critical historian to be suspicious of interesting statements put forward by others with an air of authority; to be sure not to read into any statement any meaning but that intended by the author;

to ascertain when possible the author's source of information, and the character, position, antecedents and probable motives of the original witness vouching for any fact.

'It is by solidity of criticism more than by plentude of erudition that the study of history strengthens and extends the mind. And the accession of the critic in the place of the indefatigable compiler amounts to a transfer of government in the historic realm.'

From this time onwards Brother Bede continued to pay close attention to Acton's conception of history. When the *Cambridge Modern History* began to appear he somehow contrived to lay hands on the printer's page-proofs of the first volume, from which he tore out and inserted amongst his loose notes the opening chapter, in which Acton's plans for the whole work are set out in his own words, and the first pages of the third chapter in which his conception of modern history is quoted.

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At Hawkesyard Brother Bede went beyond his masters and fellow-students in more than history. The course of Scripture, with Father Hugh Pope as lecturer, was as good as could be desired in any seminary: but even Father Pope, with his exceptional gift of making his subject alive, was by the scholastic nature of his task obliged to handle his text somewhat formally and critically. Brother Bede's interest in Scripture was too personal to be satisfied with that. He passionately loved all goodness and truth, and desired them as fountains of life within himself; and he never doubted that he would draw them perfect only from the person and teaching of Jesus Christ by way of knowledge and love. With his usual direct and thorough method, having given his lectures all the attention they claimed, and having entirely satisfied his master, he went on in his free time to compile a life of Christ for his own use.

This work was never published nor ever meant to be. It still exists as first written, but in a form unsuitable for

publication without much editing; and no other hand could touch it without injuring it as a witness to the simple piety and growing wisdom of the youth who wrote it, and afterwards based his whole life and work upon it.

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While, then, preparing a great fund of matter for future preaching, he was also training himself assiduously in the art of preaching. As a novice at Woodchester, before there was any question of his being called upon to preach even for practice, he drew up plans of sermons for Christmas Day, Septuagesima, Lent, and the Feasts of Our Lady. His very first sermon was preached in Latin before his brethren assembled in Chapter for the singing of the Martyrology very early in the morning of Christmas Eve. Using the plan he had already prepared for such an occasion, he composed a homily of extreme simplicity, rendered in a Latin that fluctuates uncertainly between medieval freedom and classical stringency. This sermon in the boyish hand in which he wrote it out and corrected it for delivery, was afterwards assigned its place amongst the later Christmas sermons preserved between the pages of his *Life of Our Lord*.

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His preaching, always natural and spontaneous, was, nevertheless, from first to last a carefully practised art. But it was never in the least degree artificial. In preaching as in everything else he was an encouraging example of the way freedom and discipline need each other. He neither disguised nor paraded art and rule; from his youth he mastered both without allowing either to master him. His deep interior freedom which he treasured as his most precious possession, enabled him to submit to the discipline of art, rules and good habits, not merely without becoming their slave, but with such dignity, care and self-possession that they set upon him like a second nature. In

the pulpit his manner was intimate but reserved; his voice, light, clear, masculine and resonant as a silver bell, his gentle gestures of hands and shoulders, his shining expression of eyes and face, were all released with the freedom of a bird singing, yet under a strong control long ago inwardly acquired.

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In the crowded hours of his student days Brother Bede still found ample time for wide general reading. His tastes in humane letters were almost universal, but his preference was for the classics, for poetry full of rich but simple pathos and moral strength, and for stately prose in the tradition of Christian, and especially English culture. He read Latin and French with ease, and Greek not so easily but fairly well. From his early years he felt his way gradually into a satisfactory reading knowledge of Italian. In his twenties he mustered enough German to get the meaning out of one or two historical works in that tongue, but he did not follow up this beginning, and in his last years professed to know nothing at all of it. He read no general literature in any modern language except English and French, and in the latter he never went beyond the historical, biographical, and religious writings that bore immediately on his studies and his professional work as priest and Dominican.

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His attraction to Newman stimulated his enthusiasm for Oxford, which was also fed from many other sources and especially from his study of English Dominican history. In his *Chronicle* he cries out with delight as he records that Father Vincent McNabb has been invited to give a term's conferences to the Catholic undergraduates in the University. There is also unmistakable depth of feeling—he usually loved brevity—in his long transcription from Lacordaire's lament for Oxford in the thirty-

seventh of his *Letters to Young Men*. It begins: 'What a sweet and lovely place this Oxford is'; and it ends:

'How my heart yearned for you as I walked solitary amidst these young men of your own age! Not one of them knew or cared for me; I was to them as though I did not exist, and more than once tears started to my eyes at the thought that elsewhere I should have met friendly looks.'

(Further extracts will follow in subsequent issues.)