

HISTORY AND THE CATHOLIC STUDENT

THESE are few places in England where it is so easy to lose events as it is in Oxford; and there are few times in Oxford when it is so easy for events to be washed over by the term as in summer, when the river and the parks claim all who have not already been absorbed into political meetings or into polite afternoon tea with the man one knew in Colombo and whom one expected—even, possibly, hoped—never to see again. Yet there is one event, in particular, which it would be well to rescue from the spate of term's activities, for in it were embodied many of the virtues which our own age has neglected, the virtues of *stabilitas*, of patience and of the unhurried building for a time beyond the span of our own individual lives. We refer to three farewell lectures delivered by the Regius Professor of Modern History, Powicke, in which he dealt with the movements in the Oxford history school over the fifty years of his association with it.

There was much in the lectures of direct and immediate interest to the Catholic student—even to those who did not sit on the south side of Balliol hall, and were thus unable to let their gaze wander occasionally to where the late afternoon sun lit up the portrait of Manning, giving a radiance to the ascetic countenance of the Cardinal, whose benediction, it is not entirely fanciful to suppose, was granted both to the lecturer and to his audience. How many hearts must have been gladdened to hear of Tout in his later years saying that if he had his time to come again he would begin by making a thorough study of the work of St Thomas Aquinas? And who could fail to be pleased by the touching reference to the resurgence of the friars preachers into the university's intellectual life? Certainly there must have been some who gave thanks that within the space of the Regius Professor's own lifetime so much of the Church's part in the formation of Western society had come to be recognized, and not least on account of the sympathetic lecturer's own labours. But the question inevitably suggested itself as to how long it may be before another Regius Professor will be given to us as generous as Powicke has been, and as to how much longer Catholics are going to be dependent upon non-Catholic historians telling the truth about the Church's work in the world? For it is steadily becoming more obvious that not only the history of the Church but even the history of our own society will soon be incomprehensible to any but a few outside the Catholic ranks. If all the sympathetic imagination which went to the writing of 'Tudor Cornwall' could not preserve the author from

making a travesty of Cuthbert Mayne's life it is unlikely indeed that justice will be done on the part of the growing school of Marxist *manqués*.

Over a hundred years ago the challenge to Catholics was issued in quite categorical terms by Hegel, and has been reissued in our own day by his followers at Oxford, from the calm unflurried manner in which they have flattened out history (as they have flattened out life) and have treated the Church as nothing more than an incident in the world's history to be carefully and primly set in its place along with other movements in the dialectic of the idea. Have we Catholics prepared an answer? To be sure, the answer can be given in philosophical terms but to be effective for a generation which thinks of philosophy historically it is essential that a reply be given from history itself; it is vital for Catholics to write sacred history, to deal even with what are apparently purely secular affairs in terms of sin and redemption. The reason for this is simply that affairs can never be purely secular which concern human beings since to each human being is offered sonship in God and since the whole of his own life is the story of the response which he makes to that offer. It has become fashionable in the history schools, for instance, to cry down the chroniclers' condemnation of King John, to consider his sins as rather unimportant matters for any but medieval obscurantists, and to point with favourable eye to the increased efficiency of the chancery or the *curia regis* during his reign, a fashion, be it remarked, which indicates that even senior common rooms have not been left entirely unscathed by the managerial revolution. Now, if this modern view of King John is the correct one, if, moreover, this view is so skilfully maintained that modern men are led to consider it a full, sufficient and adequate explanation of John's career, then clearly the Catholic historian has lost the battle, and the palm of victory goes to the Hegelians or the managers, or whatever name they shall be known by. And the rising generation will be taught to see the story of men as that suicidal dialectic with no *terminus ad quem* for the individual and no *terminus* for the species—though whether such a *terminus* for the species would be intelligible or hopeful to the individual we gravely doubt.

Thus the task of the Catholic historian is simple—at least in conception, even though the invigorating and joyous work of achieving it is going to be neither smooth nor easy. He must approach history reverently as the story of God's dealings with his creatures; he must see these dealings not as a problem external to his own being which he can calmly solve from outside, but as a tremendous mystery in which his own life is committed and from which he can

no more escape than could his fellow sinners of long gone centuries, who have already decided in time ('their own eternity') where they shall dwell 'in God's eternity' For him the whole of the past, every individual act of every human being, must be brought to the foot of the Cross and seen in the fearful darkness and yet more fearful light of that moment when a creature—none other than each one of us—crucified the Son of God. For outside the Redemption there is no history, and that which is outside the Redemption is not. A mystery cannot be held within a mere conceptual framework, because it is not something to be thought *about*, but something to be lived *through*, and every Catholic historian must re-live and re-suffer with the groaning creation until his tensed imagination creates the true story of dying men, told to men dying by one about to die.

But how, one might ask, are we poor mortals to set about this work and is it not impossible to relate these apocalyptic *dicta* to the everyday grind of the historian's work? No one who studies history would minimize the difficulties but neither could any Catholic historian fail to think of numerous cases arising in his work in which he has observed painful injustices and sought for reparation. For example, amongst our Catholic forefathers was a godly man, a man of the subtlest intellect whose lot was cast amongst the turbulent and uncomprehending baronage of fifteenth-century England. This man, Bishop Pecock, is responsible for one of the shrewdest defences of the Papalist position produced by his century, his deference to the Vicar of Christ is in marked contrast with his low opinion of General Councils, and at the time of his condemnation he made an appeal to the Pope who seems to have been favourably disposed towards him. Yet this man has been claimed as a Protestant for no other reason than that his writings were condemned in England—and he is therefore assumed to have been one of those ever-recurring phenomena, a morning-star of the Reformation, though his brightness is counted as dimmed by his supposed cowardice. The truth of the matter is that Bishop Pecock's submission was a moving example of supernatural obedience; but it has not been so interpreted in the past because his biographers have been Protestants, for whom the idea of supernatural obedience is, to say the least, a difficult and elusive one. What lessons they might learn from a true and sympathetic account! Again, there has been a great revival of interest recently in the work of Giambattista Vico, the great Italian thinker, a revival mainly due to Croce and his somewhat esoteric followers in Anglo-Saxon countries. Since Croce and his Anglo-Saxon troupe (themselves heretics) have the greatest admiration for Vico (himself apparently orthodox) they have assumed that Vico was, like them-

selves, too intelligent to be really orthodox, and so this eminently, profoundly, Catholic thinker has suffered the ignominy of having his religion treated almost as though it were a *faux-pas*, which respectable philosophers do not mention. Surely some Catholic historian can find it within the scope of his *pietas* to right the wrong done to these men, and to many like them, who have run the race and kept the Faith?

These random cases are two of the many obvious examples of the need for reparation and everyone can think of others for himself. They are both, however, very much on the surface and we have indicated that it is deeper down in the lives of individuals and communities that we should wish to probe, with the aid, possibly, of those tenets of psychology, and particularly Jung's, which are especially suited to seeing the wholeness of individual lives and their constant thrust towards God. For at the centre of every man's life is the Rock, whether he likes it or not, and it is always in relation to the Rock that the Catholic is bound to visualise the struggles of the past. Sometimes the centre is not difficult to find and Hilaire Belloc with his customary ease has adroitly pointed through the tinsel of the Restoration Court to the depths of Sir John Coventry's heart, where the roystering knight turned over silent prayers to our Lady and commended his soul to the suffrages of the faithful. Nor would it be difficult to show how the constant pull towards the Rock provided the Church of England with whatever of Catholicity has been left to it, yet who but a believer could tell adequately of the drama in Bishop Burnet's soul as he sought in vain to follow the Catholic asceticism learnt from Fletcher of Saltoun? Again, how much is to be learnt of Ken's saintliness through a glance at his library full of Papistical books of devotion, or how much of Law, of Butler, of the gentle Cole of Bleccley through seeing at every turn of their lives the eternal shadow the Rock under which they moved. These, once more, are signs sufficiently near to the surface to be readily distinguishable. Others there are which are no longer visible and would be lost for ever to us did we not know of that ceaseless undertow which tells us whither they have vanished. Horace Walpole is not a person, for example, whom one thinks of immediately as connected with the beliefs of Bishop Challoner; nevertheless there was another side to the great Augustan far different from that which he presented to the world, an aspect of his character which we should never have known but for the dream which he dreamed, out of the fever of which was begotten the Castle of Otranto standing in the shadow of the Rock. And after Otranto came the mysterious Mother; these only a profound psychologist can fully

understand; even the dimmest-eyed of readers can discern the shadow.

The materials of our work, then, are to hand, for all material has a *nisus* towards Catholic form and the need is simply for Catholic toil with Catholic wills and Catholic intellects. It is not too much to hope that from such holy travail a new vision will be granted to our generation, a vision of the most intense suffering being borne vicariously by a St Catherine of Siena or a Little Flower, a vision of souls being saved through the tireless devotion of the unnumbered faithful, a splendid vision in which the foreground is given to those who have won it, to the Curé d'Ars, to St Benedict Labre and to all their fellows, shining with God's glory against a background of lesser souls like ourselves, like Napoleon, like Marshal Stalin. Nor need any who by their work pray that this may come to pass fear that their lives will be wasted in academic sterility, for theirs will be the greatest work of apology in centuries. As long ago as the 14th century Dante sought to justify God's ways to man through his *Divina Commedia*—he did not make the great refusal; in the 19th century a solitary priest in Spain wrote single-handed that most powerful apologetic, *El protestantismo comparado con el Catolicismo*—he did not make the great refusal; may we of the 20th century be not unworthy of them and not unworthy of the dowry of Mary in which we live: *quia iudicia Domini vera et justificata—in semetipsa.*

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THE ACADEMIC HERESY

THE world today is struggling to shift immovable blocs, but there is one fast-forming bloc which, despite its great inherent dangers, seems to have received little notice. The extension of education and the emphasis laid on its purely formal side are tending to introduce a trade union as it were, of 'men of letters', whose blessing it will be necessary to obtain before being accepted for any profession or administrative post—I say 'men of letters', referring to those symbols of academic prowess which follow their names rather than to any knowledge of the humanities which might, in a more liberal age, have led to their acquiring them. In the academic world at the moment, fortunately, there are still many fine representatives of this more enlightened past, but it is very hard to see how they can find worthy successors under the present system, particularly if education is to be state-controlled. The more obvious characteristics of this system are excessive specialisation and an