

THE LAST REFUGE (abridged edition) by Peter Townsend. *Routledge, 10s 6d.*

Seventeen years ago the Curtis Committee shocked the social conscience of the nation by their report on home life. Today, in his survey of Residential Institutions and Homes for the Aged in England and Wales, Peter Townsend, with the help of four research assistants, has done an equally devastating report on how we look after our old people. After living in a welfare state for nearly twenty years, it is, perhaps, an even fiercer comment of our way of life.

This meticulous piece of social research combined with real care and concern for the people involved provides such enthralling reading that it is a difficult book to put down. However, when we do put it down the book requires an answer and that answer is *not* a Royal Commission or a Committee of Enquiry. *The Last Refuge* has fulfilled that need. The answer must be a drastic effort on the part of local authorities, voluntary organizations and religious bodies to put their houses in order.

Peter Townsend offers us certain principles on which future policy should be built, starting from the basic belief that every endeavour must be

made to preserve the independence of the individual.

Less communal homes are needed; more sheltered housing and hospital extensions should be built and domiciliary services should be extended. However, throughout the book, it is very evident that no specially planned housing, no vitamin-increased diets, no intelligent use of gadgets will ever compensate for inadequate and poor relationships with those who visit the aged in their own homes and those who supervise their residential care. Tolerance, understanding and respect are due to the old who have won their rights to them in the heat of the day.

Is it too much to hope that this report will rouse the constructive interest of its readers so that the country will press for a new act to protect the old. If for no other reason, we should, perhaps, as a matter of self-interest consider this report. We, ourselves, will be old one day and now is the moment to make sure that when we are the treatment meted out to us is what we should like for ourselves and other people.

*Hilary Halpin*

SIMONE WEIL by Jacques Cabaud. *Harvill Press, 42s.*

The present book is an exhaustive – and exhausting – biography of the brilliant French Jewish thinker who seemed for a long time to hover on the threshold of Christianity and finally died of self-inflicted starvation in a London hospital at the age of thirty-four. The author traces her career from the precocious schoolgirl through her student days and her teaching jobs to her factory work, her brief participation in the Spanish civil war and her ineffectual attempts to work for the French resistance movement. He spares us nothing, neither long extracts from her innumerable newspaper articles nor even the casual notes of her pupils, and the personality that emerges from this immense documentation is by no means attractive. Without a trace of humour, Simone Weil was given to pontificating on every subject

under the sun, be it philosophy, theology, social questions, politics, and even the quantum theory of Max Planck.

Catholics have often believed that she was a Catholic at heart, but the material published in the present volume makes it abundantly clear that she was very far not only from Catholicism but from any form of Christianity. She is often regarded as a mystic, but though Jacques Cabaud himself considers her experiences to be 'mystical', his accounts of them leave one doubtful. For what are we to make of her statement that Christ came into her room telling her he would teach her things of which she knew nothing, then led her out into the road and into an attic, where, though 'he had promised to teach me, yet he taught me nothing' and instead they 'spoke of

all sorts of things without plan and order, as old friends do', finally putting her out on the stairs and letting her wander about the streets? (pp. 171f). She further speaks of experiencing the presence of Christ, yet she considers that 'Dionysius and Osiris are in a certain sense Christ himself' (p. 192). She also has a veritable hatred of Judaism, the religion of her own race, which she accused of making an idol of the Jewish destiny and being less in touch with divine truth than the religions of the neighbouring peoples. Christianity, on the other hand, in her view over-stresses the personal nature of God; to her the idea of God's personal love for his creatures was deeply suspect.

Enough will have been said to show how far Simone Weil was from Christianity; indeed, she had fashioned for herself a religion according to her own preferences. How then was it possible that Père Perrin, the French Dominican with whom she had long discussions, should have thought her so near the Catholic Church? Mr Cabaud gives the answer from her own correspondence: because Père Perrin was blind she did

not have the heart to tell him exactly what was in her mind, and as she constantly used Christian terms such as Christ, the Eucharist and grace, though with meanings of her own, it was only too easy for him to misunderstand her.

Simone Weil was certainly an extraordinarily gifted as well as an astonishingly opinionated and fanatical person; she asked Admiral Leahy, for example, to stop American food supplies being distributed in unoccupied France by the Vichy government; she considered this immoral, because most Frenchmen supported General de Gaulle and therefore ought not to benefit from material help received through a government which they condemned. In the same spirit she reproached an atheist for letting the Dominicans help him to escape from the Gestapo. This attitude shows that she did not understand the idea of all-embracing Christian charity; whether she herself was as important and as 'holy' as she is currently considered will no doubt be decided by posterity.

Hilda Graef

BERNANOS by Peter Hebbelthwaite, S.J. *Bowes and Bowes, 12s 6d.*

This is a very good book. Not only does it provide in a small compass a great deal of up to date and accurately documented information about a writer whose work, with a few notable exceptions, has proved difficult for English readers; its six carefully planned chapters progressively build up a coherent and convincing critical whole which stimulates us to reread Bernanos in the light of a fresh and balanced appraisal. In other words, it fulfills the function of creative criticism.

Fr Hebbelthwaite sets the scene by describing Georges Bernanos' general temper as a writer, his fierce rejection of mediocrity, his search, in an anti-heroic, post-Christian world, for the hero and the saint. As a novelist his spiritual home lies in the mystery of the agony in the garden, and of Calvary. In the light of this fact we are introduced to the main novels as well as to the isolated experiment in a film-script drama, *Dialogues des*

*Carmélites*. The critic analyses Bernanos' pre-occupation with the nature of 'angoisse' and 'misère', tracing the evolution of his portrayal of sanctity from the comparative crudity of abbé Donissan in *Sous le Soleil de Satan* to the child-like simplicity of Chantal in *La Joie* and of the unnamed hero of the *Journal d'un curé de campagne*. We are shown how the author is increasingly successful in giving his saints a real literary incarnation. Well selected quotations from this outstandingly great prose-poet of the French language show how the imagery and the literary form in general (dialogue, letter and diary form) brings out and supports Bernanos' main themes. The study is summed up in a discussion of the link between his political and creative writing.

To Mauriac, whose involvement in 'angoisse' was of a radically different nature, Bernanos'