

TEN THOUSAND SAINTS, A STUDY IN IRISH AND EUROPEAN ORIGINS, by Hubert Butler.
The Wellbrook Press, 1972. 334 pp. £3.

This study of Irish saints by an Irish scholar, although not an academic one, is very learned, almost too learned to be light reading. Names of peoples, of saints, and places abound on its pages in such profusion as to be bewildering, especially to one who is not a Celtic scholar, which the author obviously is (as well as being a Classical scholar and with a knowledge of modern European languages). Although he would not agree, half the battle to make sense of the early history of Ireland, if it is to be won, requires proficiency in philology and etymology, for there is precious little by way of documentary evidence; there are just names and little more; and what often makes confusion more confounded is that the names are often the same in many different places so that it is hard to decide whether they refer to one man or to different men; e.g. there were fifty-eight saints called Mo Chua.

Briefly Mr Butler's thesis is as follows. Ireland was populated by tribes from all over the place and in many instances long before the Celts appeared on the scene at all. They came from Italy, Iberia, France, Germany, Thrace and Scythia, the Caucasus, Greece and elsewhere. This has been going on for thousands of years. These many tribes and tribal fragments had traditional genealogies, the tribes and some sort of clan and lineage system being co-ordinated. The author acutely observes that when tribes split this was reflected in the genealogies and that when there was fusion between different tribes this also was reflected in them by a fictitious kinship link between their ancestors being in one way or another forged. In all this he is supported, though he does not say so, or I suppose know it, by Semitic and other source and anthropological research in recent decades.

The tribes and their constituent parts had named ancestors and their names turn out, in the author's opinion, to be popular euhemerism, the eponymous hero-founder being just the name of the tribe personified. Consequently he became a figure, or perhaps one should say fiction, around whom popular etymology and hagiologists of one sort or another wove a web of stories to account for the name. So, for example, (St) Moling was so-called because he is said to have jumped over some rushes to escape from spectres, *ling* meaning jump; and if we split up the name Ainechglas we find that *ainech* means face and

glas means green, so that person, or supposed person, had a green face.

The last stage in the thesis is that when Ireland was converted to the Christian faith these tribal leaders of doubtful authenticity became saints, though how and when cannot be known owing to lack of adequate information, if any information at all. It was of course the policy of the Church, where possible, to Christianize pagan cults but I think the author goes too far in suggesting that this was in the case of these saints by deliberate forgery. That, as the author in effect claims, the Irish saints are sanctified pagan persons, who in any case never existed, would not be accepted by many Irish hagiographers, and there have been very many of these; but what historical or semi-historical evidence there is would seem to support Mr Butler's contention that most of the Irish saints are very dubious figures (as also in Wales and Cornwall). Even St Patrick is dubious. In spite of what the rationalist Bury says, there is very little evidence to support what is generally accepted in Ireland about him, but he has become a symbol of national sentiment and will not easily be displaced. Moreover, apart from such evidences as there are, this is a logical deduction. At least 10,000 saints in a small island, even given centuries for them to accumulate, seems a bit excessive. Also some of the stories which have gathered around their names make some of them to be more than oddities and eccentrics, just incredible. St Canice when dining with some nuns resurrected the roast lamb they set before him. He also sent two white birds to pick a baby out of the sea. St Ailbe was suckled by a wolf; and so forth. All these many saints were not of course canonized by the Church. We are not told what is the attitude of the local ecclesiastical authorities towards their cults.

The whole topic of Irish saints is very complicated. It takes us far back into history and historical conjecture and beyond both; and from what Mr Butler tells us it would appear to be a complex tapestry of many interwoven strands: pagan traditions and cults, a great variety of ethnic and cultural sources, Christianity (both Celtic and Roman churches), and others. Mr Butler thinks that one day historians will unravel it and assess the significance of each strand. In the absence of documentary sources I doubt it. Much must

always remain conjecture. Anyhow, Mr Butler has made a gallant effort in this unconventional

and largely original book.

E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD

THE GRAND DESIGN OF GOD, by C. A. Patrides. *Routledge and Kegan Paul*, London, 1972. 17 + 157 pp. £2.50.

Dr Patrides is a prodigiously learned writer who can keep to the point. He aims, in little more than a hundred pages of text and about half as many of footnotes, to trace the importance of the traditional theme of God's providence in human affairs in a literary tradition starting with the Old Testament and finishing with the *Four Quartets*. This is not as strange a piece of overweening ambition as might appear. Dr Patrides is not by and large concerned with conventional literary criticism. He cannot resist an occasional aside. He has an important point to make about Marvell's Horatian Ode: I cannot myself believe that George Herbert's poem *The Collar* 'compresses within its thirty-six lines the broad circumference of the traditional vision of history', nor does it seem plausible—to me at any rate—to think that the theological overtones in the poem are 'unwitting' and the narrator is only 'subconsciously cognisant of the real context of his blatant aspirations'. But basically he eschews directly critical comments. He writes lucidly and agreeably for the most part—there are occasional lapses into the cook-book style of the late Ambrose Heath: 'Ravished as we are by his seductive sentences, we do not always discern the underlying structures of the divers meditations comprising his *Religio Medici*'.

What the book sets out to do is to show how in fact the generally accepted Christian rejection of cyclical views of history and the presentation of an alternative view of providential interventions from time to time, was incorporated into the intellectual traditions of Western Europe and North America. Dr Patrides is concerned with low not high theory. He looks as the medieval chronicles, for instance, not for what historians have generally considered important but for the annals going back to the Creation or the abstracts of biblical history which often precede them. What we are shown is that the way he views certain events, sometimes from remote times, are as important to the author's view of life as the particular things he has to say. In the event Dr Patrides has succeeded, I think, in showing just how the small change of a convention such as this has entered into the consciousness of generations and shaped decisively an important sensibility.

There is one point, however, which provokes a thoughtful comment. Dr Patrides, with much authority on his side, signals out *Ecclesiastes* as the one book of the Bible out of step with the rest because it offers, or appears to offer, a cyclical view of experience at variance with the rest. But is not the point, and the point moreover which shows just how remarkable the replacement of a cyclical view by a providential one is, that experience of everyday matters for most people is easily and naturally interpreted as a formless flow with no significance except what is read into it? The point of *Ecclesiastes* is to remind us that the history of the Chosen People is not composed of Moses and Maccabees. I mean we naturally divide our experience into a realm of 'politics' and a realm of 'history'. 'Politics' is an everyday matter and the urge to treat it as a cynical game of limited point is difficult to resist—and often enough not to be resisted. Where the difference comes is that we sometimes—usually after the event—see that some everyday politics have an altogether different significance, we call them history not politics, and agree they have a significance wholly other and greater than the events we call politics. Yet it is not easy to distinguish them at the time. I suppose Easter 1916 is a case in point, and I came across a very acute comment made for the first time very recently that the real turning-point of the last war occurred when the British and French governments resisted the temptation offered by the Russian attack on Finland to get out of their commitment to oppose Nazism and seek to form a general anti-Bolshevik front—which they could probably have got. If this is right—and I think it is—an historic decision was taken though it seemed only a piece of the usual political squalor at the time.

It follows that the attempt to reduce the scope of the historical and absorb it into the realm of the squalor is a radical example of the de-christianization of our culture. It is obvious when one reflects on the sort of thing that goes on in academic historical studies that this attempt is being made on some scale. The sort of thesis that argues that the French Revolution went for very little since Napoleon restored a tarted-up *ancien régime*, or the ecumenical historiography that treats the Reformation as though all the issues could have been settled by a