

Book Reviews

WORDS FROM THE ALTAR. By Mgr. Kolbe. (B.O.W. ; 5/-.)

Five-minute sermons, welcome as they surely are in church, would seem to be things to avoid when gathered together in a volume. Such was the frame of mind in which I opened this book, but after a very short time I found myself apologising to the Right Reverend author for my unfounded and ungenerous sentiments. Brightness and originality are the notes of these Words from the Altar; they are light, brief and to the point; logical, compelling and of solidly practical value: there is no labouring of the obvious, no discoursing on the commonplace: they come very near to the high point of what the ideal short sermon should be—sound doctrine, presented attractively, not so thin as to be vague and yet not so overpacked as to be stodgy and ponderous. I hope all who have to preach will study this great little book and, if need be, learn from it and thus help to improve the general level of the modern sermon.

WOLSEY. By Hilaire Belloc. (Cassell & Co. ; 15/-.)

Mr. Belloc is a great virtuoso artist, and he also has many of the qualities demanded of a great historian. His historical portraits of great men, rich, vivid, compelling, are never detached unnaturally from their background, never cease for a moment to be significant and indicative of the critical issues of their times. What those issues usually are, and what those crises; what, in other words, are Mr. Belloc's principles of historical interpretation and judgement, is too well known to need detailing here. Their frequent reiteration provides ample and recurring scope for the exercises of hostile critics. James II, Richelieu, and now Wolsey, have been in their turn but so many instruments on which Mr. Belloc has played and re-played, and elaborated with the necessary variations and enrichments, the themes enunciated on the trumpets, as it were, of *Europe and the Faith* and the *History of England*. *Wolsey* is quite the best of the trio. He is, for Mr. Belloc, the man with whom it lay 'more than any other man whether the good or the evil fate should prevail': whether, that is, the Christendom of the Middle Ages, under the fecund influence of the Renaissance, should evolve happily into some 'glorious heritage of another kind,' or should suffer 'shipwreck and dissolution.' Wolsey, says Mr. Belloc, had it in his power to avert the disaster, but failed; and failed through two main faults: he was too ambitious for himself, and he had no vision. In a word, despite his many brilliant qualities, he was essentially superficial. And yet his fortunes and those of England stood or fell together. The Divorce was

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the crisis not only of his own life, but of that of England, and consequently of Europe, 'a tragedy general and particular.' For England, by Wolsey's fault and by his fall, 'fell on the other side of the barricade, joined the forces of disunion, and that principle whereby Europe had been one was dissolved and was lost. We were all torn asunder.' Here is all Mr. Belloc in a nutshell.

Wolsey gives the impression of being impressionist history, in spite of the sop of eleven justificatory notes thrown to the Cerberus of the 'academic' historians at the end of the volume. But what a brilliant impression it is! Wolsey the peacock, proud, disdainful, superlatively capable, yet strutting blindly to disaster, was made for the bravura and the glitter—and yet, withal, the austerity—of Mr. Belloc's English prose. After a preliminary survey of the Europe of the early sixteenth century, and a series of masterly portraits of its chief personages, all done with that extraordinary power which Mr. Belloc possesses of endowing the trite and the commonplace with novelty and fresh significance, the story of Wolsey's tragedy is expanded to the proportions of a five-act drama. The author modestly makes no claim to competition with Professor Pollard's more detailed study, of which he speaks with great respect; judgment and interpretation are, he submits, the core and the essential functions of history. Many and grave and damaging, no doubt, are the objections that can be urged against Mr. Belloc's own interpretations and his particular methods of arriving at his judgments, in this, as in all his other historical works: his ruthless doctrinairism, his gallic intransigences, exaggerations and over-simplifications, his apparent blindness to many considerations that might tend to blur the bold black-and-white outlines on his canvas; yet he does ultimately stand for a conception of the function of history that it is becoming increasingly necessary, because increasingly difficult, to maintain in these latter days when Clio the Muse is struggling to keep her head above the overwhelming waters of 'Modern Research.' In the belief, which he shares with so antithetical a writer as Professor Trevelyan, that History, as a realist philosophy, should deal with the 'how' and 'why' of great movements and should still be written so as to appeal to the 'general reader,' as a branch of literature, using research without being dominated by it, Mr. Belloc is 'on the side of the angels.' That being on that side, he should adopt extreme, and as many think, frequently unsubstantiated opinions, is perhaps ultimately a less important consideration.

H.O.E.