

# Reviews

**ERIC GILL** by Fiona MacCarthy. *Faber and Faber*, London. 1988. Pp. xiii + 338. £17.50.

This is the third full-length biography of the sculptor, craftsman and publicist, Eric Gill, who died in November 1940. There has been only half a century for a genius of intense variety and activity to find his place in a society which he constantly criticized throughout his brief life. He was a devout Catholic (he was closely associated with *Blackfriars* in its earliest days). Nevertheless, unlike most of the Catholics of his time, he attacked the structure of the materialistic capitalist world of contemporary Britain in his words, in his works of sculpture, engraving and lettering, but above all by his way of life, in which he attempted what he called 'A Cell of Good Living'.

The second biography took that title twenty years ago, but the present book is different in that its author makes full and elaborate use of the private diary which Gill kept in detail from early days, and which the earlier biographer chose not to draw on. The life thus revealed stands as a glaring challenge to what society even in the second half of the twentieth century takes for granted as established human and religious behaviour. Eric Gill conducted his already well-documented public mode of living in revolt against the accepted mode, but the diaries reveal that this revolt entered the very fabric of living at its most intimate level. His private life had a labyrinthine complexity as intricate as a David Jones poem.

It is not, then, surprising that Fiona MacCarthy's biography has already stimulated such repercussions—the most discussed of the hostile attacks on Gill which it has so far produced probably being Bernard Levin's article 'Taking Gill's true measure', which appeared in *The Times* on 13 March. She may well be censored for publishing her findings, particularly while some of Gill's family are still living, but they were perhaps intended to shock and scandalise.

If, like some of the reviewers whom Levin has criticized, we refrain from passing judgement on Gill's breaches of sexual taboos—taboos of a kind which even today most people consider basic, and which the Catholic Church certainly considers basic, such as incest and adultery—our hesitance is only excusable on the grounds that such conduct in a man widely seen as holy requires careful explanation by competent psychologists. The suggestion has been made that Gill, in his sexuality, may have been suffering from a polymorphous condition, which would mean that he grew up undeveloped: the source of the childish fun which he enjoyed and which enlivened his adult artistic life was also the source of his

sexual behaviour. This explanation gives the lie to the idea that Gill was some sort of sexual giant. On the contrary, being sexually underdeveloped, he was always in certain profound ways hampered.

We are thus left with a large section of this biography needing to be discussed with care and discretion. Nevertheless, this book also reveals the potential importance of many of Gill's contributions for the contemporary world. For example, he began early in life to develop his realisation of human work, which, if adopted, might have revolutionised the popular critique of the communist way of life. He elaborated the idea of work being the individual responsibility of each worker with his friends in the community he created at Ditchling, such as Edward Johnston and in particular my father, Douglas (Hilary) Pepler. As Fiona points out, that association, had it been permitted to continue, could have ultimately saved Gill, and in fact, because it would thus also have saved some of Gill's creative ideas, would have been of inestimable value for the wider society. We can see the way the working-out of those ideas was developing in the Westminster Cathedral Stations of the Cross, which belong to the Ditchling period.

Had it continued when Gill was at work in international centres such as Geneva or Jerusalem, the community approach of Ditchling would have modified his style. It would have been hard for Gill to become closely associated with a large industrialised concern like the Monotype Corporation. The Ditchling period was so full of vigour, as Fiona writes: 'The mood of those days, the seriousness of endeavour mixed with high spirited excitement at the novelty of things, almost a sense of daring, comes over very strongly in the minutes of the early Tertiary meetings, recorded so precisely in Gill's own lucid handwriting' (p. 145). But it was not to be.

A different type of community came into being in Wales and afterwards at his Buckinghamshire home, Pigotts. He would have shuddered at the comparison, but during this later period Gill, surrounded by his family and apprentices, had become a pope in his Vatican. For this reason following the intimate story of this life means following not only the development but also the deterioration of the person, as it appears day by day in the diary. The author of this biography, basing herself so tantalisingly on this source, unwittingly shows the gradual decline which ends almost tangibly. 'In the last few years we see Gill growing more despondent. He seems somehow to have shrunk in size. Described by John Betjeman ... he appears a toy eccentric, a peculiar teddybear' (p. 287).

It is unfortunate that Fiona becomes more and more engrossed in the intimacy of the diary, so that she overlooks some of the significance of the work in which Gill was engrossed as his life drew to an end. Thus, for example, he was deeply involved in literary work on peace. With the hideousness of a total war approaching, one which involved madmen like Hitler, it was impossible to avoid occasional contradictions, but he continued to labour with astounding energy with pen and chisel. He had already established his reputation internationally, and one can imagine a world-wide effect, had his original inspiration been allowed to progress. But Fiona quotes Gill as realising that he was a prophet without honour: 'They don't believe in my prophecies.'

And so the biography ends sadly on greatness unfulfilled. But stone

and wood remain longer than human life, and Eric Gill has left a vast amount of beauty in those materials. If I may conclude on a personal note, I have a vivid recollection of Eric Gill at Pigotts. Father Bede Jarrett, who had shortly ceased being Prior Provincial of the English Dominicans, had taken me, a young Dominican priest, as a possible bridge between two original friends and collaborators, Gill and my father, by then for some years at variance. Eric had been at my ordination, and the two had met there. On the occasion at Pigotts we stayed for lunch and talk. I remember the warmth and friendliness of Eric's welcome. He treated me with the deference one might expect from a Socrates, listening to my youthful utterance with interest and consideration. But the gap remained unbridged.

CONRAD PEPLER OP

**BELIEVING IN GOD. A PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAY** by Gareth Moore OP.  
*T & T Clark, 1989 Edinburgh, p vii + 289. £14.95.*

Gareth Moore has explored a number of ideas that are central to the Christian faith. He covers, for example, what it is to love God, to fear him, to be rewarded or punished by him, what is meant by a miracle, and so on. Throughout, he is greatly influenced by the writings of Wittgenstein. In particular, he is influenced by Wittgenstein's view that to believe in God is not to entertain a hypothesis but to enter into a form of life and he is especially concerned to deny that God can be construed as a thing or an object. In that respect, he often does us a service in helping to remove false images that may enter into our thinking about God. Moreover the book is delightfully written, having that simplicity and clarity which is so easily underrated and so rarely achieved.

For all that, the book seems to me to have severe weaknesses. They may be roughly expressed by saying that, whilst Moore is not of course a logical positivist, he seems determined to confine himself only to those categories that a logical positivist would allow. In a short review, that point cannot be developed in the detail it deserves. The following, however, are examples of what I mean.

1. Moore works throughout his book with a distinction between the logical and the empirical which is of the most rigid kind. For example, he says that our understanding of God is of one who is absent. He then concludes that to speak of God as not absent is to commit a logical blunder which is comparable with speaking of a square circle. But that would be true only if the aspects under which we conceive God were entirely exhaustive of him. That is to treat the concept of God as if it were fixed in the manner of a concept in geometry. It is the characteristic of an abstract study, such as geometry, that we pin down our concepts, allowing nothing to come under them which we have not allowed already. There are other concepts of a similar type. For example, at any time or place, no one is to count as a bachelor unless he is male and unmarried. The point is, however, that these concepts are not typical of concepts in general. It is the characteristic of the concepts that we apply to living reality that they have shifting aspects and admit of no sharp distinction between the logical and the empirical. The point may be illustrated by reference to an ordinary name. It is essential to