

## BURGUNDIAN PILGRIMAGE

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**B**EGGARS can't be choosers, and when it was evident that the French strikes would make transport indefinitely doubtful, we decided to renounce the tidy shape of our original plans and let chance offers on the road take us where they might. Perhaps even in the limited time at our disposal—three days only—we should see something of St Bernard's country and the places where he had been. So we set out, the two of us, hopefully.

The first offer, taking us beyond Auxerre, came after no more than five minutes walking and we were soon moving through the forest of Fontainebleau in the morning sunshine. The rain which had broken the oppressive heat of the previous two days had left the leaves clean and shining, and beyond the wood the blue sky opened that was above us all the way; a route through Moret with its narrow gates and an old house in a world of moving waters, past Sens, and gradually into downland till you are on a ridge of hills. The trees along the road change from poplar to unclipped chestnut and then to generous plane and, now in the Côte d'Or, the Yonne lies below on the right, a broad and pleasant river in a singularly favoured land. To have read in one's history books of the power of the medieval Dukes of Burgundy is to have learned the hard way. Here one has only to look to understand. A country of such resources, so royally self-sufficient and assured, could scarcely be less than a kingdom. The light has a quality all its own, the very air moving among the leaves in the orchards seems blended according to secret ingredients. And white and honey-coloured in this light, bathed in this air, on the crown of a steep hill stands the abbey of Vézelay.

It was thus, with the sun at noon, that we reached the beginning of our pilgrimage. For here in the crypt are relics of St Bernard, and in the church, with his incomparable eloquence, he preached the Second Crusade. It was the end of March 1146 when the Saint, having tried hard to evade the task, rose to speak before a gathering of a hundred thousand

pilgrims. Reading first the Papal proclamation, he gave way to the intense emotions of his heart. Only the most generalised accounts of his sermon survive, but the effect was immediate and the subsequent disaster filled him with grief. In his letters he complains how many of those who returned came back no better than brigands.

The abbey church itself is Benedictine Romanesque at its noblest, the originality of its vaulting of properly monastic invention, the conception wholly serene and ample. The sculptures, a translation into stone of the ingenuities of the illuminated page, are capable of a liberal variety of mood and feeling. As one stands beneath the majestic Christ of the narthex, the great doors open upon a sanctuary of radiant white, the brilliant purity of which is enhanced not—as one who had seen only photographs might think—by contrast with dark or black, but with warmest dun-to-coffee-coloured stones. This was not the only occasion when we noticed the importance of a combination of light and colour which is hard to capture. We lunched with the Benedictines and then, pausing a moment by the relics, took the road again.

The car that drove us via Avallon to Montbard was a little too splendid for mendicants, but it brought us almost to Fontenay, our next destination. It was in any case such an afternoon as money could not buy. There were cornstooks along the skyline against the blue, dahlias in the gardens, wistaria hanging from balconies and unexpected towers, the hedgerows dense with seeding grasses and already the first golden signs of autumn in the woods. At Marmagne it was time for None and we said it together, walking the last kilometres: 'We have heard, O God, with our ears: our fathers have declared to us'—the trees gathered about us—'the work thou hast wrought in their days, and in the days of old'. What a happy coincidence! 'For they got not the possession of the land by their own sword: neither did their own arm save them'—the first sound of running water—'But thy right hand and thy arm, and the light of thy countenance: because thou wast pleased with them.' There among the trees lies Fontenay, as low as Vézelay is high. It was in fact, as one could guess, marshland when the first party of Cistercian monks came there at the end of 1118, and it took perhaps a

dozen years to render the place habitable. Bernard brought the new community personally and almost certainly composed his first treatise *Of the steps of Humility* at the request of its abbot. How could we have been prepared for so profound a visible expression of its doctrine? Of all that we saw in those brief days it was beyond question Fontenay that brought us closest to the spirit of primitive Cîteaux. That such an experience should still be possible is due to the unique state of preservation of the monastic buildings, church, cloister, chapter, scriptorium with its niches for book-cupboards complete. Happily the guide realised our wish to avoid the holiday-makers and left us alone after the party had gone. It is the spiritual littleness of Fontenay that no words can convey. Again photography deceives. The camera has its effects too much in mind and one had looked for a cloister nearly twice as large as it really is. St Bernard, however, habitually called his monks 'the poor of Christ', and here is that poverty and simplicity, not an ugly material penury—though the walls are bare of all embellishment—but a spiritual lowliness, the lowliness of the empty and the hungry whom the Lord fills with his good things. Lovers of the Cistercian writings of the golden age would grasp at once the complete aptness of this setting; anyone who did not know them would have to invent them. It would be absurd to draw too sharply that evident contrast which has sometimes been made between Vézelay and the abbeys of Cîteaux. For where Vézelay gratifies the eye, it is not a surface gratification. It is simply the large acceptance of the fact that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. Fontenay is rather the soul at its deeper levels laid bare before God, the caverns below the earth where the waters break out, the garden enclosed which is the image of paradise where the Lord speaks again with man as his familiar friend. One brings nothing in one's hand, for one has already given all one has, and one comes before God with that ultimate disposition to receive which is the final truth about the Maker and the made. It is hard to believe that one could see and understand so much at a single glance. Yet this is what happens. It is a deeply moving experience. We knelt before the statue of our Lady in the church where no one prays

any more and said *Sub tuum praesidium*.

Vézelay still stands as plain for all to see as ever it did, but the Abbey of St Peter at Flavigny which once occupied a not dissimilar vantage-point is broken down and forgotten. The hill on which it stood is a steep enough climb before supper, but the Dominican Sisters of the Countryside, whose house hangs above the valley, gave us the kindest and most unfussy hospitality and the present owner of the abbey ruins provided a curious diversion for the end of the day. By torch-light we examined what there is to be seen of St Peter's. The eighth-century crypt is the lowest of a ramification of three successive levels of building. The light fell on a head, perhaps that of Peter himself, of typical late Roman statuary, on a thirteenth-century bishop in his vestments, on the wings of angels from the time of the Maurist reform. When a scholar with a trained eye and the skill to sift and catalogue an abundance of documents some day devotes a patient handful of years to this site, a fascinating monograph will be written. Material is there in profusion awaiting an interpreter. Indeed, the whole of that hill-top which sees little now but the traffic of cows and sheep would repay the closest attention. There is, apart from the parish church, more than one passable late medieval stone house, and dilapidated statues of our Lady perhaps seven or eight hundred years old stand awry in their ancient niches. But the past sleeps neglected in a place where the day's work begins early. The first cock crew at 4.30 a.m. And an hour later the small birds were astir with the rest of the world.

The second driver to stop that day said, 'Yes, I'm going to Dijon—and on to Cîteaux if you like'. The opportunity was too good to miss, so we set out on the eve of his feast for the place where Bernard made his profession. As you pass through Posanges a small moated Burgundian house with its four towers at the corners stands, a late descendant in the tradition of domestic building that must have been common when the saint was alive, and then between Vitteaux and Dijon comes surely the most beautiful country one could wish to see. Swinging round on the road out of Sombornon an incredible landscape of wide valley and far

on a level plain and, that afternoon, full in the sun. Nothing now remains of St Bernard's day, but at least Cistercians are living there once again and will show you the position of the old church when the young novice from Fontaines-les-Dijon pronounced his vows. We went to the present church for Office and heard them singing a psalm that might have been specially written for monks. 'For thou shalt eat the labours of thy hands: happy art thou, and it shall be well with thee. Thy wife—the Church—shall be—in this country of vines—as the fruitful vine on the walls of thy house. Thy children like olive plants round about thy table.'

It was, indeed, a car full of children that picked us up on the road back to Dijon where at first we had meant to visit St Bernard's home. But we found the exhibition in the Musée de Dijon too engrossing and spent the entire afternoon there. Manuscripts and pictures connected with St Bernard have been gathered, temporarily, from many parts of Europe and a probably unique opportunity is provided to study the art of the book as practised in the great Cistercian centres. In this matter, as in some connected ones, the statements of Miss Joan Evans in her important *Art in Mediaeval France* must be treated with some reserve. She does not conceal her lack of sympathy with the Cistercian reform and particularly with St Bernard, but as the exhibition suggests, even the relatively few books emanating from Clairvaux which conform to the strictest prohibitions on decoration, and those not earlier than 1150, are things in which the writing and the lay-out of the page are of singular clarity and beauty. It may well be that the tradition of a profound respect first and foremost for a good text, a tradition which doubtless owed much to the personal influence of St Stephen Harding, had nothing but a beneficially restraining effect on the productions of the scriptoria. The text is, after all, the primary need which a book must supply. In any case, if one wished to make a generalisation it would be that the average productions of the early Cistercian houses, even after the restraining legislation, are by no means inferior to contemporary book production, and the great Bible of Cîteaux or the *Moralia* of Gregory, both of which date from St Stephen's abbacy, are surely among the very finest works of their kind ever

executed. The vitality of the designs, the freshness of the colour and the vigour of the technique are completely satisfying.

A small section of manuscripts to illustrate the iconography of St Bernard has been included, among them a curious early drawing in a twelfth-century copy of the *Vita Prima* now at Mount Saint Bernard Abbey. Of this group, not the least charming is an Anchin manuscript of St Aelred's *Speculum Charitatis* with St Bernard writing his letter commissioning the work on the verso of one page, and on the opposite page St Aelred humbly receiving the command. The later portraiture is, on the whole, markedly work coming from the Low Countries.

It was two very contented travellers who arrived back late at their lodgings, and although it is hard to sing going uphill we had managed to disturb the evening lanes with a rather raucous Compline. The following day, after the Conventual Mass of St Bernard at Flavigny we left for our last objective. Evidently St Bernard had decided on an austere celebration of his feast, for it was the one day in three when we did much walking and lifts were few and far between. We succeeded in reaching Pontigny only in the afternoon. But Pontigny, an early foundation from Cîteaux, made the right conclusion to our tour, for the great church has, not the hiddenness of Fontenay, but a certain power which suggests endurance. Seen from the fields it looks like a huge ship, a solid ark out at sea. The walls are no more than nineteen metres high, but within the building they look higher. The sacrifice to sobriety which is everywhere the mark of Cistercian architecture results in an access of strength; yet there is no heaviness. It is the strength of a young man in his maturity. And although Bernard himself never had so vigorous a body these were undoubtedly the delineaments of his soul. It may be that the secret of his enduring hold on the Christian imagination is that his is a message devoid of all ambiguity.