

THE FIRST EDITOR OF 'BLACKFRIARS'

JOHN-BAPTIST REEVES, O.P.

THERE is a form of truth known as calumny.' This howler appeared in the first Editorial of BLACKFRIARS. The Editor, Father Bernard Delany, followed up by Father Vincent McNabb in the first article, was expounding 'Our Aim of Truth'. The slip was quite out of keeping with Father Bernard's character and its like never recurred while he was Editor. If he had a fault it was excessive caution born of self-distrust. It used to be said of him that when he came to be beatified the Breviary would have to admit '*Nimis demisse reputabat de se*'. To us, his contemporaries, this initial slip seemed a cruel misfortune, a quite unnecessary manoeuvre by his heavenly patrons to safeguard his modesty. We feared it might discourage him and intensify his habitual shyness of publicity. The way his lapse was brought home to him made that the more likely.

Six of us, at least, were given his leader to revise. It must have been over-confidence in his diffidence that blinded us, for we saw nothing wrong. Nor, as far as we knew, did anyone else, until James Britten opened his copy of the Review. Britten, then a peppery old gentleman and a militant convert of many years standing, was joint founder of the Catholic Truth Society, which at that date was in the early stages of a post-war 'Forward Movement'. He was learned, and zealous for the exaltation of Holy Church and the overthrow of her enemies. He was also incapable of silence or of keeping out of print when anything called for contradiction or correction. He offered himself, and was accepted, as the chief lay watch-dog for Catholic national interests and, especially, literary points of honour. His bark was savage, his bite most formidable, his pen a fountain of gall. Dominicans had long been spared his sarcasm. Father Bede Jarrett was his ideal of a cultured apostle, and Woodchester his ideal holiday retreat. But these happy relations were broken while BLACKFRIARS was being brought to birth. Father Bede Jarrett in a preliminary advertisement had published a list of the best-known Catholic writers, all of whom had promised to write for the forthcoming Review. By an oversight, due no doubt to

his goodwill and support being subconsciously taken for granted, Britten had not been approached. The omission of his name from the list was mistaken by him for a studied slight, and he protested bitterly. With the present writer Father Bernard was sent to placate him. At his bachelor home in Brentford we were received coldly at first, then with angry scorn. But having been sent to placate we persisted in our apologies and explanations, Father Bernard pleading more by his air of dumb misery than by speech. The room, crammed with books on shelves, tables, chairs and floor, became uncomfortably warm. We must have given the old man a migraine, for his hand went frequently to his flushed moist head. At last he surrendered ungraciously and showed us the door, sneering: '*Credo quia impossibile*'. A month or more later Father Bernard's confusion of calumny and detraction gave him just the satisfaction he lived for. The welkin rang. BLACKFRIARS was given publicity it had not sought; enough it seemed to endanger future publication. But within a year Father Bernard had drawn from Britten an article written for BLACKFRIARS in his happiest vein.

In the context of the great events that ushered in the seventh centenary of the English Dominican Province, incidents such as have been so far set out were very trivial. But they come vividly to mind as illustrations, now that one is being asked what Father Bernard did for BLACKFRIARS and how he did it. None of these humiliations humbled or discouraged him: he was too humble already. His humility was not learnt from humiliations, it was antecedent to them and cancelled them out. He never expected good of himself or praise from others. If he slipped or was blamed he was sad but not surprised; he had been warned, and to him warnings were salutary. *Doleat de praeterito, caveat de futuro* is part of the Rule by which he lived his exemplary Dominican life. The survival and success of BLACKFRIARS through the teething troubles of infancy and the distempers of childhood to the age of twelve is to be attributed primarily to the prophetic spiritual insight of Father Bede Jarrett, who for Editor chose a young untried religious conspicuous only for the conformity of his life to the Rule of St Augustine and the ascetic discipline of the Dominican constitution.

He was certainly better qualified by morals than by intellectual or academic distinction to edit a Dominican Review. His good

natural intelligence was better than he pretended. He was also always very well read for his years, especially in English literature, but also in French, and in such Latin works as he needed for his work and his spiritual life. The power and grace of his soberly fluent pen would have fired the ambition of almost any other young man. He came fresh from school to the Dominican Noviciate at the age of seventeen, having passed with high credit through the Jesuit College at Stamford Hill, London. What he wrote in BLACKFRIARS often reveals the wholesome interests awakened in him there, and the sound discipline by which they were harnessed to goodness and truth, human and divine. His headmaster, Father Joseph Keating, was a priest of the same lovable type as himself, though less shy, and more forward to draw others, by friendly advances, to all he stood for. The two were lifelong friends. When BLACKFRIARS was launched Father Keating had for several years been Editor of *The Month*. His wise counsel and help, reinforced by other Jesuits, were a valuable asset to the new Dominican publication.

As a student in the Dominican Order Father Bernard was not fortunate. The old generation of English Dominicans then dying out bore the mark of four centuries of persecution. They inherited a remarkable missionary zeal and an old-world culture, but the scholars amongst them had for long been few and far between. The erection of a House of Studies at Woodchester in 1854 gave the common life of the Province a more scholarly turn, and teachers of distinction began to appear. By nature and previous schooling Brother Bernard had a good foundation for solid and humane learning, and teachers who might have formed him were in the offing. Father Peter Paul Mackey was at work in Rome on the Leonine edition of the writings of St Thomas Aquinas. Fr Laurence Shapcote, leader of the English translators, had lately been Provincial and was soon to be back in the schools. The stars of Fathers Vincent McNabb and Hugh Pope were in the ascendant. Father Bede Jarrett was just back from Louvain, where he had covered himself with glory after his brilliant success at Oxford. But before any teacher of this quality came his way Brother Bernard was struck down with tuberculosis: so severely that his life was despaired of. That is why he was not set apart, as other promising students are, to take a degree at home, and proceed to Rome or Jerusalem for more advanced study. His professional

studies had to be makeshift. But during his years of convalescence he confirmed the habit of general reading in which he delighted all his life. In his thirties, when he was at his busiest as a priest in Oxford, editing BLACKFRIARS, serving the Headington nuns as chaplain, and entertaining innumerable visitors, the Provincial urged him to attempt a research degree. His thesis on Robert Kilwardby, finished in the minimum time prescribed, was so successful that his supervisor, Professor C. C. J. Webb, lamented his not being allowed to make medieval studies his life's work.

His immediate preparation for editorship was quite unacademic. As a priest he was first sent to Woodchester to be procurator. He left there to serve as Army chaplain in the 1914-18 war. Unscathed himself he went through all the horrors of the trenches. According to himself he was a coward, but the men of all ranks who sought him out for years afterwards bore witness to the contrary: and from several reminiscences in BLACKFRIARS one can gather how he faced the things he most feared and hated. Certainly his damaged lungs caused his energies and animal spirits to be depressed. But he was rarely ill, and never in peace or war did he shirk any duty under pretext of being tired or out of sorts. All his days he worked steadily on; without enthusiasm, it is true, but with quiet, unflagging resolution.

After the war Father Bede Jarrett assigned him to St Dominic's Priory, London. Thus these two men, then ranking respectively first and last in the Community, were brought into close daily contact. Within a year Father Bede was satisfied that Father Bernard must be one of the two younger men who should, under his own inspiration and direction, pioneer two of the ambitious projects he had on foot to inaugurate a new century of English Dominican life: a monthly review to be called BLACKFRIARS and a priory of the same name in Oxford. At New Year 1920 a room outside the enclosure was furnished as editorial and business office; and Editor and Manager were installed, with £2,000 at the bank as their capital. After three months of advertising, canvassing, negotiation of printing and sales, and accumulation of copy, publication began, not without jibes at the date, on the First of April. On the 24th of June, feast of St John the Baptist, Editor, Manager and Review were transferred to 63 St Giles, Oxford, once the home of Walter Pater, and since demolished to make way for the south-east angle of the present Priory. In

September 1924, to fill a gap in the teaching staff, Father Bernard was moved to Laxton. Until he returned to BLACKFRIARS and editorship a year later he was replaced by Father Edwin Essex. In October 1924 he was elected Prior of Hawkesyard, and the Review went there with him. Full liturgical life began in Oxford at Whitsuntide 1929; the new community was composed of the theological students from Hawkesyard, Blackfriars was instituted a full Priory and a formal *studium generale* empowered to give degrees, and Father Bernard was nominated its first Prior. In 1932 he succeeded Father Bede Jarrett as Provincial and Father Bede succeeded him as Prior and Editor of BLACKFRIARS. In his first Editorial, praising his predecessor for his fine work on the Review, he complained that 'his charming editorials were all too rare' and added: 'He spoke diffidently of himself, as is his wont, but confidently of his ideals, being, as he wrote, "not unmindful of the perilous nature of our enterprise".'

There are still in existence several sets of BLACKFRIARS 1920-32, uniformly bound and fully indexed—this, thanks to Father Bernard's foresight and care. They are themselves the authentic records of the Review's early years. Paradoxically they are and they are not the Editor's autobiography for those years. He reveals himself principally by concealing himself, and he betrays little of what went on day by day behind the scenes in the Editor's office, which was also his Friars' cell, library, bedroom and retreat for prayer and study, all in one. He lived simultaneously in heaven, in purgatory and on the street. St Giles was still a double thoroughfare, nothing parked there except a rank of taxis and horse-drawn cabs and carriages. Its silence was broken only at intervals by the rush of traffic, undergraduate eruptions and St Giles' Fair, during which the Editor, with a following of young people, always made merry, shying at coconuts, or at Aunt Sally, and challenging fortune-tellers to predict a worse future than he himself feared. There may still be some readers who can infer from between the lines what a happy place and time that was in spite of the mists of depression that often gathered. But without inside knowledge none can guess in what warm friendships Father Bernard became engaged to valued contributors and supporters like Joseph Clayton, Denis Gwynn, Francis McCullogh, Vivienne Dayrelle, Helen Parry Eden and Monica Calthrop; or what admiration he won from better known writers like Maurice

Baring, Hilaire Belloc, Gilbert Chesterton, Professor Phillimore and Ronald Knox, none of whom ever refused him anything. There are few traces of the anguished indecision with which he hesitated over doubtful articles by celebrities like Eric Gill (who usually won through, but was once editorially criticized in print), Robert Keable (who as Father Bede Jarrett's protégé had a good run until he showed his hand in *Simon Called Peter*), and others who in most cases were advised to try more appreciative editors.

There is plenty of evidence, most eloquent when it is negative, of the Editor's love of self-effacement. He never used the Review to draw laudatory attention to himself, or to court popularity, or to procure a reputation in the Temple of Fame, or to pontificate, or to create a personal following. His editorial chair was for him neither the crown of ambition nor a spur to ambition. When it was not a stool of repentance it was a learning bench in the school of obedience. He wrote as editor or in his own name only under pressure of authority or irresistible circumstance; but what he did write was his own mind, undictated, and freely expressed in his own inimitably clear style, coloured with his own native wit and humour and depth and delicacy of feeling. Most of his signed articles date from the period when the Review, having outgrown novelty and its initial resources, was fighting to pay its own way, which it did for some years on sales alone. He loved reviewing good books almost as much as he loved reading them; but the initials 'B.D.' or 'K' appeared only when he was short of copy, or when the 'Aim of Truth' to which BLACKFRIARS was pledged made imperative the editorial condemnation or commendation of something new and important.

While effacing himself he was earnest to bring his Dominican Brethren into the limelight. Few of their contributions came to him unsolicited. Father McNabb frequently, and Father Hugh Pope occasionally, thrust their offerings at him; they were usually welcomed, but more than once returned or shelved indefinitely. Looking back now one is struck by the number of lesser-known Brethren he brought into public notice and to an awareness of their own talent. In this he had Father Bede Jarrett as prime mover. But it was he more than any other who kept active the reluctant yet eminently able pen of Father Luke Walker.

Personally he was more interested in eternal verities than passing events. But Father Bede Jarrett was forever urging him to keep

BLACKFRIARS 'actual'. If the rising generations find the early numbers 'dated' they must thank Father Bede's initiative and Father Bernard's (sometimes plaintive) obedience. If they think their interests too diffused, their tone too often frivolous and unscholastic, they are condemning two great path-finders to whom their debt is immense, and who could both truly say '*Nil Christianum a me alienum puto*'. Gaiety, logic under protective colour of rhetoric, sense disguised as nonsense were all attuned to the hopeful, if abortive, 'forward movements' of the 1920's, and especially to the climate of post-war Oxford before, during and after the fantastic General Strike.

Father Bernard's declared policy for BLACKFRIARS was 'essentially constructive . . . its primary aim is to help in building up the City of God on earth, the Catholic Church. Its interests are as diverse and various as hers. It represents traditional Dominican teaching in Religion, Philosophy, Science and Art; and applies that teaching to current problems and present needs. It does not necessarily seek to entertain or edify. . . . We bear in mind that without charity our truth avails nothing.'

As Editor, and later when seated in higher eminence, Father Bernard often seemed a victim to his moods. They varied from childlike buoyancy to the pessimism of world-weary old age. But deep in his heart there was a perennial spring of happiness, a firm and undaunted moral resolution, a sensitive affection for his fellows, men, women and especially children; a keen sympathy with suffering; a horror of sin; a genuine poetic vein; a frolicsome spirit of fun. Those seniors and contemporaries who were intimate with him were aware of all this. Those who lived with him only as their religious superior were shrewd if they suspected it. Authority and unshared responsibility frightened and oppressed him. And his low spirits were for some disconcerting, for most, dangerously infectious.

When told he was dying, he was for a moment incredulous. Then at once his spirits rose and remained high. He was no longer responsible for anyone or anything in this world.