

## REVIEWS

THE MONASTIC ORDER IN ENGLAND. By Dom David Knowles.  
(Cambridge University Press; 45s.)

This, the most important work yet published by one of the finest Benedictine scholars of our day, is divided into two main sections. The first and, for the general reader, the more interesting section is a full, learned and fascinating narrative of the history of the various monastic orders in England from the revival under St. Dunstan to the opening of the thirteenth century and the fourth Lateran Council. This again divides broadly into three chief phases or periods: that of the Anglo-Saxon monasticism, flowering in a spirituality and culture which is only beginning to be appreciated by more than a tiny minority of the learned; that of the better known and more conspicuously brilliant Anglo-Norman revival; and that of the complex, unstable and slightly disappointing period which runs from the coming of the first Cistercians to England in 1128 to the reign of King John. The year 1216 marks the opening of a new period, one in which 'the new spheres of activity claimed by the Papacy, the coming of the friars, the growth of the universities and the emergence of a new type of diocesan bishop . . . gave to the monastic order of the thirteenth century a position and character very different from those which had distinguished the body in 1100, in 1150, and even at the time of the Interdict.' The author intends, he tells us, to continue, if possible, the history of the period subsequent to the Council; and the quality of the work actually completed is indeed so high that it would be something of a disaster for the history of Catholic civilisation if he were to be prevented from doing so. The second main section of the book is an analytic survey of 'the internal economy and external activities of the monasteries.'

It is for the specialist to judge the work in detail. So far as a detailed knowledge based on the sources is concerned, the present reviewer is an ignoramus, but one does not need to be a specialist to recognize in this book historical work of a very high order indeed. That is the first and essential thing to say about it. We have here no ordinary book useful perhaps for those who are 'doing' history, but which the rest of us can afford to neglect. This is not an ordinary book and, if the price were not so enormous, I would be tempted to say

that no one who wished to be educated as a Catholic, especially as an English Catholic, could afford to pass it by. For we have here the pedigree of our blood, the very spirit of English Christianity surveyed for two hundred and fifty of its most glorious years by a mind of rare nobility. And, so far as I can judge, the author's immense learning is equal to the task. Certainly he handles the mass of authorities with an ease, familiarity and respect which make his footnotes some of the best reading in the book.

The truth is that work of this quality puts most Catholic historical writing, in England at least, in the shade. We have here an historian who unites in himself, in harmony, such a combination of qualities as gives to his work something like greatness. Greatness, like beauty, is not simple, though it implies simplicity. In an historian it is the outcome of an array of qualities which can only with difficulty be harmonised. Of themselves they do not imply one another; far from it! But here in the same writer what a joy it is to find at once a vast erudition and a breadth and humanity of mind, a real psychological insight and interest, and a spiritual fervour, an understanding of the heights, and an uncommon literary power. The style indeed deserves an essay to itself. It combines a delicate precision of language with a certain curious dignity, an accent and emphasis wholly personal and even poignant, yet nearly always as objective and unaffected as the hills and streams of the England it recalls. So quiet and exact are the author's judgments it is a delight to let them linger on the ear and sink into the mind.

The children of St. Benedict will know best how to judge the view here expressed or implied of the spirit and practice of their Rule; the main lines of it are sketched firmly enough to provoke discussion and perhaps disagreement. Others, scrutinizing narrowly, may think they see blemishes, especially in the later chapters: a certain diffuseness, a sense of placidity in generalization. But these hardly matter, and the first charge cannot, I think, fairly be made. As for the second, it is better to wait until Dr. Coulton has had his say before we give way to what may, after all, be no more than a temperamental reaction. In any case, it is a joy for one incompetent to enter into discussions of detail to salute in these lucid and fervent pages a subtlety of interpretation, a nobility of spirit and expression all too rare in Catholic historical writing.

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