

REVIEWS

MEDIÆVAL STUDIES.

EUROPE'S APPRENTICESHIP. A Survey of Medieval Latin with Examples. By G. G. Coulton. (Nelson; 8s. 6d.)

'Everybody admits,' says Dr. Coulton, 'that scholastic philosophy, in its later decadent stages, was sadly lacking in sense of proportion: that time and energy were wasted upon trifles which might more profitably have been spent in verification of the very foundations of European belief. But it is not sufficiently recognized that all this may be said, to some extent, even concerning the heyday of medieval philosophy' (p. 14). Such a serious allegation demands serious corroboration, and this the present volume attempts to provide. From the evidence he has accumulated Dr. Coulton concludes that the lack of proportion and waste of energy were due to the limitations of the Latin tongue. Latin impeded freedom and energy of thought, because it was superimposed on the vital and indestructible mother-tongue. The fact that scholastic philosophy was expressed in Latin led inevitably to dissipation of mental force. In a bi-lingual system, one language blunts the other, which consequently loses precision. Even in the profounder thoughts of learned men the mother-tongue nearly always seemed to hold pride of place. Hence what medieval thinkers gained from the use of Latin, they lost in clarity, precision and freedom of mind. It was this limitation of thought that led them to waste their time and energy on hair-splitting trifles of speculation.

In the first section of his book Dr. Coulton produces as evidence for this thesis what he has noticed in the last few years of his researches, a mere fraction, he tells us, of the total evidence available, but sufficient to supply material for a rough *ad interim* conclusion. In the second section he outlines the history of medieval education, a brief sketch of the Schools of the Middle Ages, while in the last section he provides us with a series of extracts, with their English translations, from the Vulgate Bible and the Missal down to an early sixteenth century preacher. 'As to subjects,' Dr. Coulton points out, 'I have leaned towards those which throw direct light upon medieval education, Church faith and discipline, or primitive manners and customs.' A sound criterion of choice, indeed, amid such a wealth of medieval literature. One may consequently be permitted to question how certain passages have found their way into these pages. The greater part of the extracts, in fact, are representative neither of the dominant thought nor of the current Latinity of the period. They

may be fascinating (as the dust-cover informs us) — *de gustibus non est disputandum*, as they used to say with great good sense in those days — but they do not paint an accurate picture of the various types of intellectual activity in medieval life.

We can admire here the same good qualities and deplore the same serious defects that are characteristic of Dr. Coulton's previous works. A wealth of facts and erudition and a deal of common sense, on the one hand; on the other, an incomplete analysis of those facts, hasty and unjustifiable inferences, failure to face the true problem or to approach it from the right angle. Naturally the view of the whole becomes distorted, so that the author fails to appreciate the subtle colouring of the Middle Ages.

Dr. Coulton begins his inquiry with a golden principle: 'If we can first see Latin and the vernaculars in their due proportions, we are then in a better position to judge Medieval Thought' (p. 14). Exactly! The emphasis lies on those two words '*due proportions*,' for it is possible to over-estimate the power of the vernaculars as well as to under-estimate the value of Latin. The weakness of the author's argument lies precisely in his failure to appreciate the 'due proportions' between Latin and the vernaculars; and such a failure evidently affects the main issue: whether the use of Latin was a disadvantage to Medieval Thought, or on the contrary indispensable in promoting its growth and development. Dr. Coulton is well aware that sometimes Latin did what no vernacular could have done; its lapidary style lent itself at least to liturgical poetry. St. Thomas Aquinas' more perfect hymns could have been written in no modern language, while here and there the Scholastic philosophers expressed themselves with pointed and impressive brevity. Moreover, Latin held a unique position in international communications in an age when travel was difficult and dangerous. He allows also that this classic tongue produced in medieval times some secular poetry comparable with the best vernacular. He recognizes all these achievements, and yet he underrates both their qualitative and quantitative value. The conciseness of medieval Latin showed itself *not only* in liturgical, but in every form of poetry, including the romantic. And its output was not 'very little,' as Dr. Coulton assumes: we have only to glance, for example, at the *Notices et extraits* of the manuscripts of the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris to realise the vast store of such poetry that still lies buried in the manuscripts. It was not only 'here and there' or 'sometimes' that Latin proved superior to the vernaculars, but in every field of learning it was the only means of vital and precise expression. Until the other languages had reached their maturity, Latin was the exclusive vehicle of culture and intellectual activity. While the vernaculars were sufficient for the needs of ordinary life,

they were still in their infancy and incapable of expressing fittingly and with exactitude the more subtle and deeper shades of thought. The fact that the mother-tongue always maintained a certain supremacy is, therefore, irrelevant. Nobody would challenge that; yet while the instances from St. Aelred of Rievaulx, from Erasmus and the like support it, they have nothing to say regarding the absence of vitality in medieval Latin, which is the problem under discussion. Unbiased students of medieval Latin, such as L. Traube or Karl Strecker, if they were still with us, would scarcely agree that it lacked life. They would admit that often it did not equal the classics in elegance, and that it was a 'dead' language in the sense that it was not spoken by the people, but only by the learned of the schools. But to maintain that it was 'dead' in the sense that it lacked clarity, precision and energy in expressing the varied shades of thought in every sphere of literature and culture is as gratuitous as it is erroneous.

Dr. Coulton's accusations against the Church are no less gratuitous. The facts he has accumulated, plus a hundred more of the same type that could easily be raked up, do not produce a convincing proof; indeed we may dismiss them as *nihil ad rem*. If they did prove anything, it would be that a fair number of the clergy in their Latin studies had not reached the standard demanded by the Church; and this, despite the repeated visitations, ordinations, prescriptions of Popes, Councils, Bishops and Abbots. But even here it is easy to exaggerate. 'The monk, of all men, might be expected to be thoroughly at home in Latin, considering that it was essential to his true profession—the *Opus Dei* par excellence—to spend many hours a day chanting in that language.' Dr. Coulton forgets that among the monks many were not priests, and were not expected to possess more Latin than was required for the recitation of Office in choir. And this, of course, applies with greater force to nuns. And why should the lay-brothers, destined for manual work, busy themselves with Latin? It was especially for these, as well as for the nuns and the monks who were not *litterati*, that translations were made.

The problem of the decay of Scholastic philosophy is a complex one. The causes of the failure were manifold; but surely the use of Latin was not one of them. We may all regret with Dr. Coulton that in the latter decadent stages of Scholastic philosophy time and energy were wasted on trifles, but we deny most emphatically that this was also true in its heyday. And, after all, are we moderns really without blame in this respect? If we examine the volumes written during the last centuries under the name of philosophy, science, historical criticism, and the like, we may be tempted to regard the trifles and hair-splitting arguments of medieval philosophers as mere blemishes compared with

the aridities of our own learned men. And such works are not written in Latin.

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HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY.

PROVIDENCE AND HISTORY. By J. V. L. Casserley. (Signposts, No. 11. Dacre Press; 1s.)

This excellent little book is a credit to the series, of which it is the eleventh, produced by members of the Anglican Church under the title of Signposts. It strives to give some indication of what a Christian should make of the history of mankind. It is granted that Christianity cannot teach us new facts of human history, but in as much as it tells of three facts which transcend history—the Creation, the Incarnation and the End of the World—it can teach much about the interpretation of history. ‘Apart from it the visible phenomena of history can certainly be seen, *but not understood*; accurately recorded, but not comprehended or interpreted.’ The presence of the Church of Christ in the world and its real temporal mission are repeatedly insisted on, but ‘the active presence within history of a Reality which transcends history is not a theme with whose fulness the historian as such is equipped to deal.’ Materialistic, fatalistic and cyclic interpretations of history are recounted and disposed of, and those modern aberrations conveniently included under the term ‘fascism’ are castigated. The author issues one warning which is full of salutary truth: ‘It is not the function of the Gospel to stabilise the West. The Gospel could stabilise the West, and please God it shall, but only a West which turns to the Gospel selflessly and loves it for itself alone.’ One might be inclined to quarrel with some of the paradoxes on page 63, but not without running the risk of appearing captious. Altogether it is really an admirable little book and very well worth reading. It is sure to do much good.

N.P.B.

RUSSIA, a Penguin Special. By Bernard Pares. (Penguin Books, pp. 256; 6d.)

It is not easy to compress the thousand years of Russia’s history into a slender book of some 250 pages, yet Professor Pares has achieved this with a measure of success and given a general outline of the political and social life of Russia throughout the centuries. Naturally the book is not infallible, and some inaccuracies are surprising in view of the writer’s knowledge of the country. Thus, as an instance, to say (p. 73) that ‘all was happy and confident’ under the reign of Czar Alexis troubled by