

will be controverted, the quoting of supporting authorities for statements should not be as uneven as it is in the book. At times the

work smacks of what the French would call an *oeuvre de combat*.

ROBERT OMBRES, O.P.

**SIEGFRIED SASSOON: Poet's Pilgrimage** by Dame Felicitas Corrigan. *Gollancz*, London, 1973. 256 pp. £3.25.

It eventually got about that Siegfried Sassoon was more than a huntin' shootin' writer; it even got about that he was a poet; and now people are saying he was a religious man. I firmly believe that it is most important to remember that he was *one* man. This selection from his writings compiled by a Nun of Stanbrook who writes a very perceptive introduction confirms this view.

The last steps of his pilgrimage were prompted by a letter written to him in January 1957 by Mother Margaret Mary, the Superior of the Convent of the Assumption, Kensington Square. Sassoon himself wrote later, '... somehow I was helped to realise that deliverance had arrived. She has been the greatest benefactor of my life, and has never made a glimmer of a mistake in her guidance and influence'. Shortly after writing that letter Mother Margaret told me it was the culmination of a lifelong study of Sassoon's writing; for thirty odd years she had lived with his poetry, and had been convinced there was a religious man trying to get out. Dame Felicitas Corrigan supports this: 'When a child, he would stand in the garden of his home, Weirleigh, send his voice ringing over the Weald to God out there at the other side of infinite space across the valley, and then listen all ears to the silence, waiting for God to answer him as he certainly would. It was a parable of his whole life'. Sassoon himself gives the poet's description of it in a letter of 21 January 1960: 'As you say, all the best of me is in my poetry; and that vocation has been my only directive path in my pilgrimage of learning by mistakes, the only aim I could feel sure of, until submission set me free to strive towards selfless adoration. . . .'

Siegfried Sassoon was all of a piece and the intense suffering, self-doubt and emptiness that he experienced were part of the pattern. So was his refusal to fight for a time during the First World War, and the opprobrium that this brought upon him. The pity was, and he regretted it more than anyone else, that his war poems diverted public attention from his later and more advanced work. It was because the public were slow to share Sassoon's views on the obscenity of war and the 'screaming scarlet majors'; and of course the poems were great fun for those who hadn't been through it. It was also due to the monolithic silence of the critics. Whether or not we share Sassoon's own deprecating views of the war poems (and Wilfred Owen, who knew what it was all

about, certainly did not) we cannot ignore the opinion of Edmund Blunden, who knew him better than most and believed that the emphasis of his war poems and of his dramatic manifesto was 'essential'. In Dame Felicitas's words, 'his revolt was essentially religious in character'.

And that is what this book is all about. It traces the path of Sassoon's pilgrimage through extracts from his own writing with shrewd brief and discreet interjections from Dame Felicitas. The figure that emerges is the true contemplative engaged in worship through looking and listening, characterised by a stringent critical faculty growing sharper and finer with time. I would only quibble at the emphasis on his helplessness in old age, though I suppose a woman's eye for this is sharper than a man's, and in any case Dame Felicitas saw far more of him than I did. My memoir selects the vigour of his old age; I still have the letter where he wrote (on another's behalf) of the inanity of critics: 'not that I count on them for much except sniffiness'. The fire may be damped but they are still hot; there is no longer any need to lash out for Siegfried has come home.

The homecoming, which was a discovery of self as well as of God for the two must always go together, was celebrated with all the vigour and astringency with which the search had been conducted, and the reader will not be deceived by the serenity of tone. 'More and more I am afflicted by the noisiness of life, and I wonder how most people endure and—apparently—enjoy it! And how few of them are aware at all of the supernatural silences that surround their being—the mystery that is there for them with messages that use no human language. . . .' So, for all his revolt at questioning he did not at the end hand out ready-made answers; he himself was the answer (though he would have been astonished to hear it) in his own looking and contemplation, and above all in his thanksgiving. I suppose that is what happens when you risked being shot and actually been relegated to the lunatic asylum for speaking the truth and subsequently misjudged, trivialised and blunted by the inanity of critics. His style has always been dry and spare, and in the end his thanksgiving, devoid of cynicism, was full bone and muscle begotten like all his poetry on Vaughan, Herbert and Donne. A splendid eucharist; and much gratitude to Dame Felicitas for leading us to it. GERARD MEATH, O.F.M.