

THE OPPORTUNITY OF THE ISLES

By

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The men of the Hebrides smile tolerantly when the stranger from the south, after a week's visit, decides that the only possible life to-day is one of retirement, the eremitical life lived alone on a croft among these sea-bound strips of land. The natives are used to this type of enthusiasm; it "takes" many people in this way. But when the stranger has returned to his own place on the mainland, he soon decides that electric light and heat, railways and twice-daily posts, are his happy portion and that the life on the isles is a romantic dream. And so the natives out there, battling with their gales, scraping a hard livelihood from the rocky ground or netting it from the petulant sea, are led to laugh at these effervescent dreams.

And yet the "call of the isles" is real enough, and even though it has resulted only in a few sophisticated settlers bringing their complacent materialism in their industrially-fed cheque books to a well apportioned cottage here and there, why should this call be ridiculed? It may cover a genuine vocation only superficially allied to a romantic taste for islands and sea. At least we must admit the modern need for the eremitical vocation as such and if there are certain places where that vocation manifests itself rather than in others, that is no more than the desert was to the early fathers. Modern industrial city life is as corrupt now as was the decaying urban society of the third century, though it is painted in less lurid colours. It is becoming increasingly difficult to live according to Faith, to live the life of Christ in the city without the exercise of heroic virtue. Contraception and divorce, which mean the reign of selfish lust, are merely the more spectacular of an army of social sins which are the standards of the ordinary town dweller, so that early in his pontificate the present Pope suggested that the flight from the land was one of the causes for the breakdown of marriage and therefore of society.

Many people have sensed the need for a life led closer to the soil in order to restore the balance of a topheavy social structure. They have gone "back to the land" with energy and vision; they have followed a genuine vocation with plough and hoe, with cow and hens, with wheat and turnips. But they have not seen the vocation as more than a natural and social one in which a family should take part both for its own sake, in order to give it freedom to breathe an air untainted with lust and injustice, and for the sake of the others who are left behind. They are right. Such a vocation implies a husband, wife and children. Nature demands growth from the soil; nature demands a society

that cultivates her, treats her with respect, even weds her, for it is only in the bond of wedlock that she brings forth healthy crops and stock. Therefore the unit of society, the family, must found a stable society in sacred union with nature. The men who have returned to the land have seen that vocation and have taken their brides to try to make them into farmers' wives.

Few of these men saw that the natural vocation to the land does not contract out of the society in which they have been reared. They did not see that such a vocation must remain within the terms of reference of the town and big industry. Many of them learnt their dependence with bitter experience. They found they could not live without the rest of the world. They still depended on the urbanised world they thought to have left behind them. They had to supply the city with milk or vegetables or wheat in order to keep themselves alive. They had to try to make farming pay. And who was to pay if not the city dwellers? For society is now urban. It seems inevitable then that the natural social vocation be "sub-urban," hanging down from, dependent upon, the towns.

A supernatural vocation from God, a call to salvation for oneself and for others seldom if ever comes to a natural group of men. God does not call families but the individual. In fact our Lord expressly states that the Christian call will be the occasion of division among families. Sons will be set against their fathers and fathers against their sons. Husbands against their wives and wives against their husbands. The Apostles had to leave even their families behind, and to have married a wife is regarded as an invalid excuse for not following. This does not mean an anti-social doctrine of God and my soul alone and the devil take care of the rest, but it does mean, at first at least, a supra-social doctrine in which the soul seeks the one thing necessary. Our modern difficulty is to be able to see the matter of salvation out of a social context. We have become socially minded and regard our union with other men as part and parcel of our own individual spiritual life. Implicitly, within the union of the Mystical Body, all are gathered together, but my first step is to God alone forgetting for the once these others. Otherwise we never rise above the level of natural ethics and think that by going back to the land and struggling against our own nature in order to be independent of the rest of society we are somehow practising heroic virtue and rising from the purgative to the illuminative and so to the unitive way.

The eremitical life therefore is more necessary than ever before in order to show to this socially minded age that our Lord calls a man alone, that he calls him apart—into the cloister, yes; into the seclusion of his own room or cell, better still; but always into the depths of his own solitary heart. Grace does

not work in the mass; not even in the family mass. The hermit then must stand alone in his oratory away from other men, not that he is a selfish man, quite the opposite (but to pursue that argument would lead us back into the familiar social channels), not that he can or wants to contract out of society, but because he has fallen desperately in love with God. He finds the industrialised life of the city full of hindrances to that love, so that the intensity of his desire for God drives him out into the desert, as the Spirit drove our Lord.

The call to the life of the solitary then may be genuine, and it is certainly urgently needed, apart from islands, hills or sea. But the Hebrides do in fact provide the most feasible opportunity for fulfilling such a vocation. The native crofters themselves live like the rest of the world, a "sub-urban" life. It is more remote than any other form of modern urbanised life; it is primitive in many ways; it lacks most of the "conveniences" of the life of the city. But it necessarily depends on the bigger industrial centres for its markets for fish or potatoes, for lobsters or mutton. There is no harm in that dependence in itself. It is perhaps inevitable. The islanders are part of the society into which they are born. Naturally therefore they desire to perfect communications with the mainland and to improve their own roads for easy and cheap transport. They seek too to attract the wealth of the cities in the form of tourists who need smooth roads and airports for their speedy travel. All this is inevitable and is not blameworthy, and it has one notable effect: islands which hitherto were occupied by a few families, but were inaccessible, have been forsaken. Not only has St. Kilda's been evacuated, but many islands as small or smaller, which used to support one or a dozen or more families have been forsaken by the crofters and are inhabited only by a few cattle or sheep. The cottages stand roofless as monuments of an age which was independent of Glasgow and Lanarkshire. They can no longer house the modern crofter's family, because he cannot live without roads and frequent boats and postal services. The islands will produce as much as they used, they are fertile enough, but there is need for an accessible market for their produce if the crofter is to live with his family.

The solitary then who does not seek any life but the supernatural life of God's love, the solitary who does not wish to make fishing or crofting pay, who does not want a market for his goods which in any case are spiritual goods, do not these islands offer him a unique opportunity? No natural group of families is called to such a life. But the individual call may perhaps for some lie beyond the cloister and the regular monastic life to the hermits cell as it was wont to do in the past. Indeed, many of these islands are named after those who sought just this life—The Island

of the Hermit, or the Anchorite's Isle. Many of them were inhabited by men who cultivated God in cultivating their little patch of fertile soil tucked between rocks. But the cultivation of the soil was never more than a means, and one of the lesser means, to the cultivation of God in worship and prayer. It was needed to keep soul and body together; it was needed to exercise many of the ascetic virtues indicated by the words of Genesis: "Cursed is the earth in thy work; with labour and toil shalt thou eat thereof all the days of thy life; thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herbs of the earth." Such tilling ranks with the discipline and the hair shirt as a means of penance.

But though the vocation is individual such a life could only hope to achieve its end if some sort of looseknit society arose from a similar vocation followed by many. Co-operation in the production of the necessities of life would of itself prevent the life from becoming mainly agricultural instead of being mainly theocultural. Certainly Fr. Vincent McNabb used to say that the modern troubles were due to the early monks' confusion in thinking that their first duty was to pray whereas their first duty was to work. A hermit should never forget that dictum. Nevertheless in order to have leisure for prayer and *lectio divina* he would find it of advantage even in the material order to consort with others of like mind. The spiritual advantage would be immense. He could not only avail himself of the sacraments regularly, confessing himself often, assisting at or offering Mass daily, and nourishing himself on the divine eucharistic food, but he could learn many divine truths, learn the practical ways of prayer with far greater depths and certainty through "spiritual colloquies" with his brethren.

It should be possible for two or three men to rent or even buy an island, to roof the existing roofless cottages or build new ones, and to have regular, if only occasional, times for meeting and praying with one another. Neighbouring islands could be peopled in similar fashion and less frequent meetings—dependent upon weather and tides—could gather quite large numbers of anchorites each rowing his own small boat to the rendezvous. The general organisation could be based on an Order such as that of the Camaldolese where each has his own separate cell and plot of land, but the daily rule of life should perhaps approximate to that of the *Ancren Riwe* where the anchorite lives in poverty, chastity and obedience without taking the vows. For it would be impossible for men thus divided by stretches of the Atlantic to live according to the strict regularity and uniformity of the cloister. The Fathers of the Desert seem to have grouped themselves naturally in some such loose organisation.

This may be a romantic dream and the Department of Agricul-

ture might object to so "useless" an occupation of the land (though if the present grazing rights were not interfered with there could surely be no objection to men reinhabiting these islands). At least it offers a new possibility which has hardly been explored in these days. People are for ever exploring new forms of action, constructing new societies to deal with new evils, but they are all so immersed in the problems they are trying to solve that they mostly expend energy fervently but fruitlessly. These men could stand apart and without being fanatical could remain largely independent of the industrial society they had left. If they lived in the spirit of poverty, trusting always in the Holy Spirit, the material things they really needed would come without their having to cultivate mammon. They would cultivate the love of God close to the sea and the soil. They would found a Catholic Land movement which was based on a special and individual vocation from God to the contemplative life. They would be "men rich in virtue, studying beauty, living at peace in their homes."

REVIEW

THE FLOWERING TREE. By Caryll Houselander. (Sheed and Ward; 6s.).

This very lovely book gives the reader a sense of intimacy with the writer, especially if it be read having in mind her other two books, *This War is the Passion* and *The Reed of God*. Caryll Houselander is the poet of humanity, of humanity in the concrete, in the individual, in each and all of us, in whom—even the most unlikely—she sees always the Christ.

I confess to having opened the book with the regret that the writer, whose prose is already so musical, should have chosen to use an artificial rhythm that is neither prose nor poetry. Such a prejudice vanished before this harmony of lyric beauty, realism, tenderness and humour.

In her mind and heart the alchemy of love turns to a divine gold not only the commonplace things but even the unattractive and the repulsive.

For Caryll Houselander:—

*The circle of a girl's arms
have changed the world,
the round and sorrowful world
to a cradle for God.*

S.M.B.

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