

Reviews

THE LETTERS AND DIARIES OF JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, vol XII, Birmingham and London (Jan. 1849 to June 1850), edited by Charles Stephen Dessain of the Birmingham Oratory; Nelson, 70s.

In writing of the period covered by this volume, in which Newman had to establish the London Oratory out of the newly founded Birmingham house, his first great biographer, Wilfrid Ward, wrote:

'It would be tedious to follow the daily fortunes of the Oratories in further detail. Long and minute letters passed between the two houses sometimes three or four times a week. They are for the most part of no public interest . . . the great powers which still remained to his deep and well-stored mind were being almost exhausted by attention to matters which an inferior man of strong practical sense, and less sensitive, would have done a good deal better.'

This passage is interesting not only for the presuppositions it reveals about the nature of the spiritual life, but also for the question it provokes: what is the purpose of publishing these letters, and how far have Newman studies changed since Ward published his *Life* in 1912? Today our interest goes beyond what Newman said to how he came to say it, since we have learned how much of what he says is below the surface and not easily resolvable into neat propositional form. Writers such as Mgr H. Francis Davis and Fr Edward Sillem have emphasised the empiricism of Newman's mind—he specifically disclaimed the title of metaphysician—and that he approached problems of religious belief concretely, and in terms of people believing and denying, confusing and experiencing. (v. *The Clergy Review* for March 1963, p. 177 ff.)

In order to respond at the required depth to what Newman is saying, it is often necessary to place any propositions that might be extracted from his writings in relation to the people and circumstances that beset him: our interest is not merely in the mind of Newman, but ultimately in the possibility of its sanctification.

Thus, in the period under review, we notice how shrewdly he takes the measure of the Catholic demi-monde he has just entered—one which has 'a mortal dread of Rome', and in which 'the laity may be secularised, and the Churchmen timid'. But he soon probes into the roots of contemporary attitudes to the spiritual life. When, for example, they are all hard at work unpacking at Alcester Street, he notices that Faber 'took to reading spiritual books'; later in reply to a sickly letter, he cries: 'save me from such affection and devotion, and give me a little more tenderness for others, and a little less self will.'

But his attitudes are not merely critical: he sees from his understanding of what he calls 'us beef-eating Saxons' that what is wanted is not the discussion of 'some spiritual conundrum, such as, "Who is the truly humble man? What

do you say? you? you?"—as they do at Ratcliffe and Aston Hall', but an attack on that specifically English disease which is known nowadays as one-upmanship, or gamesmanship, namely, the art of imposing yourself upon others without actually cheating: 'What a thing it would be to extirpate donnishness in England,' he says, 'I think in malice I should like to play the St Philip among the Heads of Houses at Oxford'. St Philip, he noted, instead of mortifying 'the palates of his penitents', 'mortified their rationale, by making them do things repugnant to their pride etc.'

The theme of this volume, however, is the struggle between Newman's views and Faber's on the conditions required for the healthy development of an institution. Newman is for growth, Faber for autocratic rule. Here in a nutshell is the dilemma of the Church in the nineteenth century; and here also is the germ of Newman's later views on the proper development of academic institutions as expressed in *the Idea of a University*. In a congratulatory letter to Faber on the success of the London Oratory, the irony of his reference to a 'Mr Poncia (who) spoke in raptures of the crowds who could *not* get in' anticipates a celebrated and sustained passage some nine years later, when Newman addressed the evening students of the Catholic University on *Discipline of Mind*.

In trying to establish the London Oratory on sound lines and make the break from Birmingham one which would damage neither house, Newman enunciates principles of growth in institutions which Catholic organizations have frequently ignored at their peril. His ideal is of twelve persons—'6 children form a fair fire side'—since charity and love cannot exist among many. Since the grounds on which people come together are not those on which they must remain, Newman warns one of those chosen to go to the London House, 'persons form lasting attachments far more by their *views* of things than by their *feelings*'. He meets Faber's protestations of wanting to be 'a cadaver in his superior's hands' by saying, 'I can't command people about like so many soldiers or pieces of wood'; and in a letter which should be studied by all who wonder when a Catholic society with a top-heavy constitution and an addiction to international vice-presidents, secretaries-general, and penitentiaries extraordinary fails, as Newman himself might have put it, 'to come off', he asks Faber to let 'Providence gently to work our separation . . . as fruit ripens on the tree and falls; you all force me to take a knife and cut it off. I repeat, I cannot fight with facts.' (20 Feb. 1949).

The facts here are those which govern the establishment of all institutions that have within themselves the possibilities of future growth; and here, on the brink of that other more spectacular encounter in Ireland, we see Newman working on the same lines and with, alas, the same results.

But just because Newman's own generation was unable to see what he was driving at, there is no reason why we, the children of the second Vatican council, should be equally blind: the institutions we need for the proper development of our religion can only develop from the grass roots, from men whose attachments are to the ideas they have in common, yet whose sensitivity to each other

enables them to work patiently and methodically in those small groups from which alone any big enterprise can begin: 'I should not rely on sudden, startling effects, but on the slow, silent, penetrating, overpowering effects of patience, steadiness, routine and perseverance.' Thus Newman in the university discourse already referred to. These are the roots of his theology and of his attitude to the spiritual life: 'men of strong practical sense' are not necessarily inferior, and the results wrought by 'less sensitive minds' may seem to be better only in the short run. This is what a study of this 'tedious' period has to offer us; and as to why our indebtedness to the editor, Fr Stephen Dessain, grows with each volume he publishes, we have Newman's own words for our warrant: 'Biographers varnish, they assign motives, they conjecture feelings, they interpret Lord Burleigh's nods, but contemporary letters are facts . . . the true life of a man is in his letters.'

JOHN COULSON

GOD SPEAKS TO US, an introduction to the Bible, by Hubert Richards; 'Where we Stand' series, D.L.T.; 2s. paper, 6s. 6d. hard bound.

This is the first of a series of at least 48 booklets, each of 64 pages, meant mainly for the sixth forms of schools, but with interest for laypeople generally, since it is to cover all areas of Christian teaching. Such a series is long overdue. C.T.S. pamphlets deal with most questions, but few of them take up a reasonably mature theological standpoint, and their inadequacy has long been a real cause of scandal to many Catholics. There is now *Faith and Fact*; but the books were written for the needs of a French public, and while some volumes are good, so many are of doubtful value that it fails to provide the complete instruction that it sets out to give. Will the present editors, Fr Flood and Mr Olsen, succeed where others have failed? The first indications are most favourable. There is a theologically literate general plan, which follows the pattern of saving history through God's relationship with man in Israel, in Christ, and in the Spirit who forms the Church as sacrament of Christ; the sacraments lead naturally to a discussion of a Christian's daily life and work. Then the contributors are English, or sufficiently nearly so to count as such; for what it is worth, a good half of them are also contributors to this journal. Finally, as the first-fruits of the enterprise, and pledge of good things to come, the editors have given us this splendid introduction to the Bible by Fr Richards.

However men of earlier times managed to come to terms with the Bible, their methods have increasingly failed to appeal over the last hundred years, the Darwinian century. Our thinking is radically historical; things don't make sense to us until we have traced out their development. But this is just what critical studies have done for the Bible; they have made it meaningful once more to modern man. As often happens, the Catholic Church has been slow to use this new approach, especially in English-speaking countries; but unlike the Evangel-