

FRAY JUNIPERO SERRA: THE GREAT WALKER. By MacKinlay Helm. (California: Stanford University Press; London: Cumberlege; 32s.)

The story of Fray Junipero Serra's missionary journey from Mallorca to Mexico and to California in the eighteenth century is told by Mr MacKinlay Helm in the form of what he terms a 'symphonic biography'. In about eighty pages there are forty-seven episodes of inter-related prose narrative and verse for song, and the whole stretches from Fray Junipero's birth in Mallorca in 1713 to his saintly death at Monterey on the coast of California in 1784.

Like Blessed Raymond Lully, also from Mallorca, Fray Junipero is deeply and prayerfully a man of love, and he walks in peril and in pain with festering foot among the naked Indians. One of these, Orlando, is an attractive and surprising character who poses the question (which, for instance, missionaries among the Nuer peoples of the Nile find difficult to solve) whether one must wear clothes before being baptized. Fray Junipero after some years of hesitation comes to think that one need not!

The strength of Mr Helm's method is that with only four characters, Fray Junipero, Padre Palou—his friend and biographer—Orlando and a Spanish sailor, together with Tenor Voice, Baritone Voice, Chorus and Commentator, he can portray his story on many levels. For the most part his verse-making proves flexible enough to meet the demands made of it by this without ever becoming interesting as poetry, while his prose dialogue ranges with skill from the antiphonal to the matter-of-fact. 'Some of us even wore bearskin pants for awhile, to please the good Fathers' . . . declares Orlando.

There is a pleasing dignity in the work which arises from the close sympathy of the author with his subject, and which makes for an inner control of the wide and free treatment that he uses. Fray Junipero has 'a wise and hearing heart' and is not repelled by 'the city's cacophonous din', for 'Junipero's equity banishes malice and spite', and he dies 'lost in the Lord'. The tone throughout is warm and simple, and the sincerity with which this story of love is told could be a moving experience in a production where good use is made of the human voice.

HUGH DINWIDDY