

THE SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF WALSINGHAM. By J. C. Dickinson. (Cambridge University Press; 18s.)

'It is not easy for the modern reader to appreciate how dark was the glass through which medieval man viewed his history. The information at his disposal was frequently scanty and unreliable, with the inevitable result that the picture he saw as he peered into an obscure past differed notably from that lit up by the light of modern research. . . . In such an atmosphere it was not surprising that the famous home of Our Lady of Walsingham had, by the time of the Reformation, somewhat distorted the story of its own beginnings.' (p. 3.)

The rest of the book is an unconscious refutation of this facile nonsense. Modern research derives its light entirely from the documents of the past. These documents are now far more scanty (thanks to the Reformers) and cannot be more reliable than they were at the time they were written. Mr Dickinson is good enough to enlighten the darkness of these poor ignorant Augustinian Canons by quoting from the very documents that they composed and preserved. It was not they who distorted the story of Walsingham but the generation that despoiled them and did everything possible to efface their memory. Again and again in these pages the citations give the lie to the author's patronizing approach. For the excellent plan of the priory he is dependent on William of Worcester, who visited Walsingham in 1479, and went to the trouble of making measurements which he gives to the nearest inch. (p. 78.) The list of priors is taken from their own cartulary, and it is not suggested that the early ones are legendary. (p. 133.) Does Mr Dickinson really think that they could write but could not read?

This opening gambit is all the more unfortunate, because the book has many merits. It is scholarly, in the sense that it gives references to sources, and it is calm and objective in treating of the causes of the suppression. It is critical of Erasmus' semi-facetious description of the relics, and it is comprehensive in the sense that it includes a study of the architecture, seals and badges of the priory and the literature which it called forth. It is, indeed, as full a picture as can now be drawn, without the dangerous use of imagination. It shows that Walsingham followed the familiar pattern of religious houses, from humble beginnings to great popularity and wealth, followed by a decline in number and discipline in the late fifteenth century, and a return to something of its former numbers and observance on the very eve of the Reformation. We read of the kings and great ones who visited the shrine, but something more might have been found of the humbler pilgrims. The extracts of Northamptonshire wills published in the *Archeological Journal* (Vol. 70) show that almost up to the suppression money was left for vicarious pilgrimages to this and to other shrines.

One question never mooted is, how long it took for the devotion to be stamped out of the hearts of the English people. Perhaps there is no evidence, but as late as 1555, two Dominican nuns who had been driven from their monastery at Dartford sixteen years before were 'living continently' at Walsingham, and doubtless they at least remembered our Lady. (EHR. Vol 48 (1933), p. 211.)

The book is well produced, with nine pages of plates and a folding plan of the priory, but the price seems rather high for these one hundred and fifty pages.

GODFREY ANSTRUTHER, O.P.

MABEL DIGBY. By M. K. Richardson. (Longmans; 16s. 6d.)

Mabel Digby, the daughter of parents passionately devoted to each other, passed through a childhood of great happiness to enter on a period of excessive bitterness caused by Simon Digby's harsh rejection of his wife and two of their daughters after their admission to the Catholic Church. Mabel sided with her father in his bigotry and seems to have joined in this persecution. When her health forced her to return to France and join her mother she treated that poor lady in the most unfeeling manner by her 'outward show of scrupulous courtesy'. At length she herself was converted by what seemed a miracle when, much against her will, she attended Benediction in the church of Notre Dame des Tables at Montpellier. She sat sullenly on a chair until the third stroke of the Benediction bell and was then seen to throw herself suddenly on her knees, 'her face lit with a strange radiance, while great tears rolled silently down her cheeks from eyes that gazed and gazed'. The old family happiness, however, never returned even when Simon showed signs of relenting, and this sorrow was the foreshadowing of that which overtook her at the end of her life when as Mother General of the Society of the Sacred Heart she was to witness in person the closing of all her convents in France and the expulsion of her Sisters under the anticlerical regime of M. Combes in 1907. Her sufferings, however, were softened by the wonderful joy brought her and her daughters by the solemn beatification of their saintly foundress, Blessed Madeleine Sophie Barat, by Saint Pius X in 1908. Her health, however, prevented her presence at that ceremony and her holy death occurred in 1911.

In keeping with what the gifted authoress Mother Richardson calls 'the unscholarly treatment' of her biography, but what we would prefer to call attractive, is the choice of the illustration which forms the frontispiece and adorns the jacket, in which Mabel appears in full riding habit complete with top hat and switch, an unusual introduction to the life of a servant of God.

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