

Etienne Gilson 1884 — 1984

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When Etienne Gilson died on 19 September 1978 at the age of 94, medieval studies suffered the loss of one of its most celebrated historians of philosophy. This year witnesses the centenary of his birth. It is perhaps appropriate briefly to recall the memory of this truly great scholar of our age. He was a cultured man in the best traditions of western scholarship, a fact to which his literary output amply attests

Born on 13th June 1884 in Paris, and after a notable rise through the French educational labyrinth, Gilson emerged as a scholar and teacher of considerable dimensions in terms of the breadth and depth of his learning. Though a dedicated family man, he was never afraid to meet the countless calls to lecture, write and also to attend and contribute to the numerous conferences to which he was invited. Such was his stature to become that on more than one occasion, he was called to represent his country on the international stage in various capacities.

His travels in the service of his *scientia amabilis* were fruitful not only in the sense that they gave him the opportunity to share and enrich his scholarship through the contact he made with so many others on both sides of the Atlantic, but also because it was on one such journey to Canada in 1927 that the idea of establishing a programme of Medieval Studies in St. Michael's College, Toronto, was seriously discussed. Two years later the new Institute of Medieval Studies was born, receiving Pontifical approbation in 1939.

Interwoven with his academic commitments, he took an active part in the national issues of his homeland and also (though not always approvingly) in the changes taking place in the Church he loved so very much. An impressive array of academic and civil honours came his way during his long and distinguished life. As these honours are impressive so also is the scope and depth of his numerous publications. A survey published by the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies (*Etienne Gilson A Bibliography*, PIMS 1978, edited by Margaret McGrath, Etienne Gilson Series 3) lists well over one thousand items, without attempting to be comprehensive in listing publications on or about Gilson. It will suffice here only to point to a number of the larger works in order, if that were necessary, to illustrate the remark made above.

In 1912 he produced his *Index scolastico-cartésien* and in 1913 *La*

Liberté chez Descartes et la théologie. These followed upon a period of study under the influential H. Bergson and L. Lévy-Bruhl. Nine years later saw the appearance of *La Philosophie au moyen âge* (2 vols., 1922, rev. 1944). The English translation of this work, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, was published by Sheed and Ward in 1955. He was an avowed Thomist and in this volume he seeks to locate St. Thomas as *the* Christian philosopher in whom Christian philosophy reaches its most sublime expression. He also does justice to other luminaries of the age, whose achievements he celebrates with generous recognition. His outline of Thomistic metaphysics, *Le Thomisme* (1919, ET 1924), was followed by *La Philosophie de saint Bonaventure* (1924, ET 1938), in which he attempts to enter into the intricacies of St. Bonaventure's philosophy and mysticism. The year 1929 saw the appearance of his masterly *Introduction à l'étude de saint Augustin*, and in 1932 he published his Gifford Lectures under the title *L'Esprit de la philosophie médiévale*, translated into English as *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* in 1936. Then came his *La Théologie mystique de saint Bernard* (1934, ET 1940), dealing as it does with the characteristics of Cistercian mysticism. Later still he issued his *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* in 1937. This was followed by his delightful *Héloïse and Abelard* (1938, ET 1953). In 1952 his *Jean Duns Scot, introduction à ses positions fondamentales* appeared.

Besides these and other major works, Gilson wrote extensively on other topics, notably the arts, and published such works as *The Choir of Muses* (ET 1953), *The Arts of the Beautiful* (ET 1965) and *Painting and Reality* (ET 1957). Gilson was also influential in launching the celebrated *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* and made many notable contributions to that journal.

Trying to recall the memory of a man of such outstanding accomplishments and broad interests would seem to be a perilous task. Whatever is said leaves so much unsaid. Gilson, whatever his weaknesses, was and remains a tower of strength in the field of medieval studies. Part of his genius is to be seen in his ability to make available to such a wide and diverse audience the riches of medieval culture and thought without in any way sacrificing his own insistence on scholarly rigour. Whether all that he wrote and said will endure only time will tell but one thing is certain, there will be many who will owe to him a debt of gratitude that cannot easily be repaid.