

simplicity of the fools somehow justifies these 'monolithic, authoritarian, ecclesiastical organizations'.

In the tradition of 'folly', however, it would be appropriate to enjoy rather than criticise such passionate and partisan pleading. My second criticism is perhaps more serious. In the first chapter, Mr Saward makes a distinction between 'the life-giving folly of the cross' and both 'the madness of the world (called wisdom)' and 'the madness of those possessed by evil spirits' (p 26). It is a vital distinction, and one which needs to be much more clearly emphasised in the whole book. The scope of the book, the desire of the author to include a wide range of people within the category of 'perfect fools', goes too far and leads to the impression that 'folly for Christ' has been redefined to mean all personal, enthusiastic and vigorous devotion; what is more, it is only too easy to see this as approval for any childish, rude and irresponsible behaviour, excusing its protagonists from that courtesy which is charity in its social setting.

While it is necessary to indicate the

THE LIVES OF THE DESERT FATHERS. Introduction by **Benedicta Ward S.L.G.** translated by **Norman Russell.** *Mowbray/Cistercian Publications.* 1980. pp x + 181. £4.95.

The popularity enjoyed by Helen Waddell's *The Desert Fathers* provides sufficient indication that the lives and sayings of the Egyptian monks and hermits of the fourth and fifth centuries still have something meaningful to say to the very different world of the twentieth century – and indeed, even more recently, practical demonstration of this has been provided by the revival of monastic life in the desert monasteries of modern Egypt. In her selection of texts Helen Waddell included a few excerpts from the anonymous work known as the *Historia Monachorum*, an account of a visit to various Egyptian ascetics made by a group of Palestinian monks in 394/5; it is a complete translation of the Greek original of this text (Helen Waddell used Rufinus' Latin translation, at that time widely thought to represent the original form of the work) that we are provided with in the present attractive volume.

dangers inherent in this theme of folly for Christ's sake, this is not to detract from the value of either this aspect of Christian sanctity or from Mr Saward's book. It is perhaps the very fact of attention to such 'folly' that causes any problem there may be. In this, as in so many other aspects of Christian behaviour, self-consciousness is destructive; the one who acts out the pattern of folly as a way of following the humble Christ in silence and dereliction, pursues a path which is indeed a way of salvation but the one who comments and analyses this way, seeing it as a challenge to respectability and finding in it something to be praised and noticed is a different person altogether, and the two must not be confused. This 'folly' is not something to be proud of; it is part of the mystery of humility, that looking-glass land, in which the last are first, the first last, and the poor enter the Kingdom before the rich. Insofar as *Perfect Fools* draws attention to the essential non-conformity of Christian life in its deepest aspect, it is a most valuable and challenging study.

BENEDICTA WARD

Five short but perceptive introductory chapters introduce the modern reader to the unfamiliar mentality of this strange world where miracles and demons seem to lurk round every corner. The translation reads fluently, and this is followed by some helpful annotation. At the end a comparison is made between the Greek original and Rufinus' translation (often more an adaptation) and the Syriac version incorporated into Ananisho's seventh-century compilation called 'The paradise of the Fathers' (hitherto the translation of this Syriac text by E. A. W. Budge, a polyglot keeper of Assyrian and Egyptian Antiquities in the British Museum, was the only one available in English of the *Historia Monachorum*).

The cover, depicting the magnificent apse fresco at Bawit, in Upper Egypt, is an added attraction to this book, which can be enjoyed as much by the ordinary, as by the more specialized reader.

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