

**A GATHERED CHURCH: THE LITERATURE OF THE ENGLISH DISSENTING INTEREST** by Donald Davie. *Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, pp. 152 + pp. 8 illustrations* £4.25

In 1953 E. P. Thompson published *The Making of the English Working Class*, the eleventh chapter of which, 'The Transforming Power of the Cross', has had an effect on the small pool of English Non-Conformist history not unlike that of the fifteenth chapter of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* on Church history in general. In using the phrase 'psychic masturbation' to describe some aspects of Methodist devotion, Thompson did not endear himself to the historians of the Methodist revival, most of whom were themselves Methodist. It would be fair to say that in the controversy that followed (and still continues), the argument has not gone entirely Thompson's way; and in a stimulating footnote to the 1968 Pelican edition of his book, he suggests that 'a common ground may be found in literary criticism'.

Professor Davie's Clark lectures for 1976 quote Thompson, and contest some of his conclusions, on several occasions. Is this book, then, the next step in the debate? I think not; and in order to demonstrate its inadequacy, I had perhaps better take next that paragraph of quibbles which one normally puts at the end of a review.

It cannot be the case, as Davie states on p. 124, that Thomas Abney as a dissenter 'took advantage of the Occasional Conformity Act'; that act was intended to prevent occasional conformity to the Church of England by dissenters. What he took advantage of was its repeal in 1719. On p. 60 we are told that 'enthusiasm ... could be controlled, barely, as long as John Wesley was alive; after his death it was defenceless before such homegrown hot-gospellers as George Whitefield....' John Wesley survived George Whitefield by twenty years, and preached at his funeral. Much of the second lecture is given over to a discussion of Isaac Watts's great versification of the opening verses of the ninetyeth Psalm: since Professor Davie makes some play of the fact that variant versions have been preserved in the oral tradition, it is a little disconcerting that he gets the first word of the first line wrong. Watts wrote (and continued to print throughout his life) 'Our God, our help in

ages past'; the emendation to 'O God' was one of the great editorial brilliances of John Wesley. On p. 133 the statement (by Joseph Ivimey) that Robert Robinson was the author of 'Jesus, [sic] lover of my soul' is allowed to stand without correction; it was printed as Charles Wesley's in 1740, when Robinson was five. On p. 137 James Bennett is quoted as saying of Robert Hall that he dealt 'largely in the compositions of those who valued thoughts as the sons of heaven, and despised words as the daughters of earth'; Professor Davie's comment begins 'Bennett, we perceive, is a male chauvinist'. Others might say that the sexism, if any is to be laid at the door of the author of *Genesis* 6. 'The text of the Wesley hymns', we are told on p. 47, 'has been reliably established': reliably enough, perhaps, for Professor Davie, who quotes Wesley in his *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952—unchanged in the 1967 reprint) from the *Methodist Hymn Book* of 1904, which has the double attraction of being out of print and totally inaccurate. Even the nearest attempt at a standard edition, by George Osborn (1868-72)—is both incomplete and by modern standards editorially incompetent. There is no major Eighteenth-century English poet whose text is in as much of a mess as Charles Wesley's.

I could go on; but I think I have made the point that these are perhaps the most slipshod Clark lectures since Edmund Gosse's disastrous foray in the last century. Professor Davie has read widely in the literature and memoirs of dissent; but I get the impression that he has read, not to understand, but in search of evidence for his hypothesis. I will come to the hypothesis later; first, I must complete the general picture of the book. There are no footnotes; quotations are only identified by a general reference, usually without page-numbers, to the source of each chapter. Most of the notes at the end of the book are extracts from the memoirs of early dissenters; there is a charming anecdotal prolixity about these, somewhat reminiscent of the books Professor Davie has read (I would not want to lose, for example, the story on pp. 115-6 of Cromwell's grand-

daughter and her nocturnal visits in Great Yarmouth). But they are no substitute for exact references. There is a similarly alarming failure to quote the text of the writers he is discussing: thus for example a long account of 'Charles Wesley as 'paradoxical' and Blake as 'dialectical' contains only one quotation from Wesley, and a reference to Blake's 'Tyger' as 'a splendid exception'. I dwell a little on this point, since these faults are sometimes said to be the exclusive property of critics of a tendency rather removed from Professor Davie's. Eight pages of illustrations show some attractive examples of dissenting architecture, but these are undiscussed in the text, where we are only referred to the Norwich octagon as 'the most elegant meeting-house in England, or perhaps in Europe' (surely that is an unacknowledged borrowing from John Wesley?), which is not illustrated. Why the banal modern statue of Charles Wesley at the New Room, Bristol has been included I cannot discover.

Professor Davie's thesis, as those who have read his recent writings might guess, is that there is a good, sober, conservative tradition of dissent, which has been gradually done down by a nasty, democratic, enthusiastic tradition. Thus on p. 53 '... what we see, I suggest, as the aristocratic Anglicanism of George Herbert modulates into the Old Dissent of Richard Baxter and Watts and Doddridge, and then is overtaken by the evangelising of the Moravians and Wesleyans—is a test case, historically recorded, of what happens when a body of difficult but momentous truths is taken "to the people".' Thus Davie can admire 'the wonderful figure of John Wesley himself'—but the trouble is, he's surrounded by all those *Methodists*. There is a story that Newman, when a bishop told him that the views of the laity were of no consequence, remarked 'we should look rather silly without them'. Wesley was of course, aware of what he was doing: 'I submitted to be more vile'. If he had not done so, we would not be interested in him today. But Professor Davie has already described (p.4) as 'illegitimate' the 'transition, from Wesleyanism considered as a pattern of social and political behaviour to the body of literary art which Wesleyanism produced'. An elitist account of the relation between culture and society finds its counterpart in

a cleavage between theology and Christian experience. But we cannot understand people who believed, like the Wesleys, that the two belong together if we are committed *a priori* to such a model.

The dangers of such an approach show up most clearly in the discussion of Lawrence. Criticising Leavis, Davie argues that 'The purpose of Church or Chapel is not to be "the centre of a strong social life" [Leavis's phrase], but to be a centre and arena for *worship*, for the enactment of the ultimate mysteries'. Here surely is a theological mistake; you can't have one without the other. And Davie's dismissal of the Congregationalism of Lawrence's Eastwood is based on the flimsiest evidence, vital though it is for his case: Helen Corke's memories of her own dissenting childhood (place and denomination unspecified), 'the Barnsley of my boyhood' (I know what Cambridge was like when Donald Davie was there in the '40s, because I was there in the '60s), and the evidence of one short story by Lawrence. On this basis we are told that 'the congregationalism of Eastwood was as impoverished, intellectually and symbolically, as it was at that date through most of the kingdom.' Well now; dissenters have long memories, and it may be that someone can still tell us whether that is a fair verdict. I know little about Lawrence, and less about the Congregationalism of this period; but I do know (because I looked in the *Congregational Year Book* for 1900) that Eastwood Congregational Church then had 98 members, 194 Sunday School scholars, and 31 teachers; I know that its minister was Robert Reid, who in 1898 finished his training at the Nottingham Congregational Institute, where he would have taken a four-year course, which besides Literature, History, Natural Science, Philosophy and Political Philosophy and Economy, would have taught him Christian Evidences, Scripture, Criticism and Interpretation, New Testament Greek, Doctrinal Theology and given him instruction in preaching. Senior students usually took courses at University College, Nottingham. And we do have at least one description of a Congregational Chapel in this period: it occurs in a book which Davie has read (he praises it on p. 17), Bernard Lord Manning's *Essays in Orthodox Dissent*, where he describes the

chapel at Ravenstonedale, Westmorland under his father's ministry (1898-1909): 'In his Monday night Bible-class ... I received my first and best teaching about Luther and Calvin'. I doubt if Eastwood was all that intellectually impoverished. But I admit that some of them may have voted Labour.

And so it goes on. The old dry dissenters are goodies, the evangelicals and (particularly) the Unitarians are baddies. Unitarians, of course, tended to be on the left until Chamberlain left the Liberals: Professor Davie tells us that John Aikin 'though he pamphleteered in 1790 against Parliament's refusal to revoke the Test Act, was a more admirable and engaging person' than his fellow-Unitarians (p. 123) —all that was lacking to make him a joy to meet was acquiescence in the persecution of his own religion. Mrs. Humphrey Ward, whose *Robert Ellesmere* was taken very seriously by very serious people, is nowhere mentioned (nor, speaking of omissions, is the greatest account of late nineteenth-century dissent, Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns*). George Eliot's Anglican Evangelical phase is mentioned, but not her Unitarian contacts, without which she would probably never have translated Straus and begun her literary career. And although we are given a couple of approving references to Matthew Henry, there is

nothing of the much greater achievement in biblical scholarship of A. S. Peake, who at the end of Professor Davie's period 'rescued a generation of Non-Conformists from fundamentalism'—a cultural achievement surely not entirely without significance.

I would not want to end on an entirely sour note. When he writes about people he likes, Professor Davie is, as one might expect, usually worth reading; he is good on Watts, and even better on 'Mark Rutherford'. Purged of its grosseries and its Gosseries, this would make a useful introduction to an area of literary history which has been relatively neglected (although Professor Davie's claim that it is totally so is exaggerated: Nichol Smith's *Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse*, 1926, gave Watts fourteen pages, and the Wesleys six; this seems about fair, compared with eight for Shenstone and six for Parnell). It is certainly a better book than the 'more acrimonious' appeal to the dissenters of today with which he threatens us on the final page of his text promises to be. But then, if he thinks that the political climate of Nonconformity is so left-wing today that it needs such a call to arms, he may be in for a shock: I fear that in all too many cases he will be preaching to the converted (by which I mean, in my confusing Wesleyan way, the reprobate).

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**GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS** by Bernard Bergonzi (*Masters of World Literature Series*, edited by Louis Kronenberger) *Macmillan Press Ltd* 1977 pp. 202 £7.95

1877 was certainly something of an *annus mirabilis* for Hopkins, a year in which he was ordained as Catholic priest and in which he wrote some of his richest poetry. If he is to have a centenary, then last year was surely it, and Professor Bergonzi's critical biography was a welcome contribution to its celebration. The book is comprehensive yet very readable, though I found the print fussy and the style prone to inelegance and pedantry—particularly in a mass of literary comparisons, many of which are at best superfluous. Bergonzi is especially illuminating on Hopkins's extraordinary intellectual and artistic powers and wide-ranging interests in conflict with the dissipating forces of a complex and often self-destructive temp-

erament. The painful and costly paradoxes of Hopkin's life and character are well presented and documented: the star of Jowett's Balliol who chose the obscurity and discipline of the Society of Jesus; the sensuous, sacramental visionary who adopted a life of ascetic rigour; the religious poet who scrupulously sacrificed the temptations of art for a puritanical faith.

Yet there are tensions which were creative as well as destructive. If 1877 is a significant year for Hopkins it is because it exhibits him supremely as the poet-priest he was. His own discrimination between them was essentially a false and self-deluding one, and it is a major fault of Bergonzi's book that it accepts the distinction as real and objective. In Bergonzi's view of Hop-