

# Look Back in Ambiguity

by G. Egner

100

The most significant thing about Cardinal Heenan's autobiography is its preface.<sup>1</sup> He cannot write the whole truth, he tells us, because ministers of Christ must keep confidences without limit of time; and he has written his own life-story because that was less trouble than the granting of frequent interviews to a prospective biographer. In other words, he regards the history of a man's life as total recall tempered with discretion. How well does this dubious conception serve him?

Best, obviously enough, in narratives of a circumscribed and picturesquely memorable kind. Days in the infants' class; a school-boy's escapade; anecdotes of life at Rome or in a parish; episodes in a journey to Russia. Some of the anecdotes are entertaining; of some (especially those of an edifying character), the best to be said is that *c'est la guerre, mais ce n'est pas magnifique*. However, it is good to have the criminally bad diet at Ushaw set down for posterity by a cardinal, while his account of The Day World War II Broke Out should find a place in any anthology of such narratives. The book proceeds in this style from schooldays to Rome and from Rome to ordination in 1930 and parish work. Before and during the war the author became involved, not only in local affairs, but in public speaking and writing. There follows the resurrection of the Catholic Missionary Society in 1947, retreat work for Clergy (of which the unfortunate *The People's Priest* was the precipitate) and the author's appointment in 1951 to the See of Leeds. We are promised a second volume. What kind of man emerges from the first?

In the first place, one of an immense and adaptable energy. The immensity is there for all to see; the adaptability will be clearest to those who have had to divide their time between activities of very different sorts. The ability to concentrate attention upon one project at a time, to turn from one to the other without detriment to both, and to preserve in oneself a still point in a turning world—these are rare and enviable gifts, and the author has made enviably generous use of them.

In the second place, an essentially simple man who has lived his life in primary colours. The Church and its service; the priesthood; the defence of the faith in an indifferent or hostile world; the bringing of all into union with Peter: these are the values that the author has prized for a lifetime and a lifetime has not called for a change in them, only for modifications in their expression dictated by policy or tact. The simplicity leads at times to paragraphs that

<sup>1</sup>*Not the Whole Truth*, by John C. Heenan, Archbishop of Westminster. London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1971, 335 pp. No price stated, but £2.75.

embarrass; but it shows to admirable advantage in passages like the author's account of his dearly-loved mother. His expression of loneliness at her death could hardly have been put better: 'After my mother died, there was nobody to whom I was impatient to tell my news'.

In the third place, a man who finds it difficult to reconcile the energy devoted to plainly conceived objectives with the nuanced exigencies involved in adult human relationships. No one can undertake the pattern of activity the author has undertaken, still less get where the author has got, without a ruthlessness in economizing life that excludes much that is good from it. Emotional sclerosis is an occupational disease of the tycoon and the author's edginess is of a piece with what other writings and activities of his have disclosed. The illustrations are especially revealing here—what a Maginot Line of microphones, birettas and bric-à-brac has fenced him from the camera! It is good to see that his latest photographs show signs of an autumnal serenity, at least in the offing.

The most memorable part of the book narrates the author's journey to Russia in the October of 1936. His method of securing admission (as a 'psychologist'); his travelling-companions (American Jews on a visit to relatives); his encounters with party officials—these are well described, and with an immediacy that owes much to his having made a record of his experiences at the time. The purges and trials were then at their height, and what the atmosphere of the *Yezhovshchina* meant to two families is vividly conveyed in the account of a visit with one of the Americans to his family in a Moscow suburb, and of an (unwelcomed) visit to the house of a party member. Throughout this part the author displays a mixture of resource, brashness and genuine courage that has its own appeal.

But more needs to be said. Prosy, entertaining, silly and touching by turns, in need of pruning but with the virtues as well as the faults of old diaries, this book discloses an attitude to life and religion that is held by the leading Roman Catholic churchman in this country. 'Discloses', perhaps, is the wrong word: the author is consistent enough with what we have learned elsewhere of him. A review must go further afield.

Kant wrote that experience is blind without ideas and what terrifies me about this book is its lack of them. In this patently honest story of a life lived, and generously lived, in the service of the *Ecclesia Sancta Dei*, I find an ambiguous emptiness near the centre that is distressing. No idiosyncratic defect in the author is to be blamed; on the contrary, it is because he exhibits so clearly the qualities of his co-religionists that the ambiguity is so central. This is our tale, our oracle, and it needs spelling out.

Autobiography is a literary *genre* that lends itself supremely well to the rewriting of the past. The author has done his best to avoid the trap and—to the point of tedium—prints letters, articles or speeches

of the appropriate period. How he does this points to the deep ambiguity. If he had merely set down the *dissecta membra* of journals he could be blamed for nothing more than incompleteness, for omitting to make, in the light of age and experience, a judgment upon the past, discerning significance in it and attempting its evaluation. But he goes through just enough of the motions of this critical and evaluative activity to reveal a persistent evasion of its demands. It is awareness that is missing. Over whole areas of the human condition as encountered by the author, moral evaluation is elusive; total recall slides over into an inability to face squarely what has been recovered by it.

Take the author's relations with his bishop. By any standards the latter's conduct was stupid and obstructive, and the author admits the existence of premature senility and poor judgment in him (p. 272). But twenty-five pages later, a letter from him 'confirms the view I had always held that he had so frequently chastised me only for my own good' and the author draws an analogy with the training of pups (pp. 227-298). This is just not good enough. Are we being invited to look at the bishop's conduct as pathological or as a planned if wrongly directed piece of spiritual training? Is that what spiritual training is? Should priests be like pups in the eyes of their bishops? We can read the author's text in either way. But, faced with such ambiguity, readers are not likely to be impressed with his claim that 'priests of my generation . . . were able to withstand hardship and injustice more easily than young priests who came later' (p. 272). 'Withstand' seems an odd word to describe a resigned acquiescence in ecclesiastical wrong-doing—an acquiescence that leaves behind such moral scars as finding significance in a comparison between human beings and dogs.

Go further back to the days at Rome. The author and men of his generation have had to encounter as bishops the development of thought which, while much older than the Second Vatican Council, is rightly associated with it. What has he to say about his own very different training? It is not easy to answer the question. 'In retrospect, it seems it must have been inadequate,' he writes on page 55, but couples this hesitant verdict with a reminder that Pope John was formed by it, though also with a disclaimer that he intends to do any more than record the style of Roman seminary life then. The ambiguity is not resolved. Again, the concept of obedience in which the author was trained was of a piece with the theology in which he was instructed, and his verdicts on both are elusive. He writes of obedience:

'It became fashionable many years later to regard all obedience as weakness. At the time of which I write [that of his disagreements with his Bishop] the accepted doctrine was to obey superiors even if they were misguided; . . . The Charge-of-the-Light-Brigade-mentality became rare during the nineteen-sixties. The obedient-

unto-death outlook was insistently deprecated by Jesuit and Dominican theologians after the Council. Such enlightened mentors were not available in my early days in the priesthood' (p. 272).

'Fashionable', 'enlightened', 'Charge of the Light Brigade', 'obedient unto death', 'insistently deprecated': how are we to take these words and phrases? We are given one unfortunate clue:

'There has been a radical alteration of outlook on theology in the years following the Second Vatican Council. I am thinking not of the content of theology but of the attitudes of theologians . . . [Much theology today] is the result not so much of the Council as of the conscious turning away from authority in the years following the Council—a phenomenon not exclusively religious. . . . Beatles, provos (Holland), hippies, death-of-God theologians, student demonstrators, skin-heads and the sex-obsessed were all children of their time. . . . Charismatic theologians are fun but they are not always safe guides to the faith' (p. 59).

I can sympathize with the author's expression here of evident unhappiness; I regret that he did not try to supplement it with some articulated acts of the reason.

I have pointed out that a theology carries its own attitudes with it. Conversely, a change in attitude connotes a change in theology if it is anything more than a piece of expediency. Of all changes in attitude among Roman Catholics in this country, none has been more striking than that concerning their relations with other Christians, and the author himself has been prominent in activities that would once have been unthinkable. What has he to say about the transformation? At times he attributes it to the war, and denies any essential novelty to what the Council did: 'the Vatican Council merely ratified what events throughout Europe had already brought about' (p. 70). One would value the comments of his two immediate predecessors at Westminster upon this remarkable piece of history. Mostly, changes are ascribed to a mysterious entity (rendering further explanations unnecessary) called Ecumenism. The introduction of such *deus ex machina* only obfuscates facts that need facing. That, for instance, when pioneers of Christian Unity abroad acted as they did, English bishops disowned them; that when some Catholics at home sought to put an end to discourtesies like the refusal to take part in civic religious services, English bishops condemned them; that disowning and condemnation alike were justified by Catholic apologists like the author; and that now we are all being asked by English bishops to do precisely what was, until recently, disowned and condemned by them. Lament the change, welcome it, or be indifferent to it, as you wish: but it is there and it does call for comment and analysis. Here it receives neither. Thus, the author quotes an article from the school magazine of his parish written at the time of its war-time evacuation to Ingham:

'Next morning, Father Heenan offered Mass in the schoolroom

and gave Holy Communion to the teachers and children. Thus our Lord came back to Ingham for the first time since the so-called Reformation' (p. 212).

He comments: 'The Christians of Ingham not surprisingly felt affronted'. The reader scarcely needs to be told that: what he is still waiting to be told is whether Father Heenan felt affronted. But if the Roman theology led to such results at Ingham and if we do not want such results now, must we not go further up the chain of causes than a blue-pencilling of the odd sentence for the sake of not giving offence? Must there not have been something seriously wrong with the theology itself?

That the author never puts such questions ought not to surprise us: his attitude to intellectual activity may fairly be described as one of genial animosity, and has found literary expression in the place allotted by him in his *Council and Clergy* to theological study. (The priest there, it will be remembered, devotes an hour or two of his day off to it, before his game of golf with fellow-priests.) Less genial in its manifestations has been the author's belief that time spent by a priest outside directly 'pastoral' work is time wasted. I have no wish to dwell on such *personalia*. But the book displays so clearly the virtues and defects of its author's religious community that, at a time when that community is under stress, some attempt to place those virtues and those defects in a wider context will be profitable.

*N'en déplaise à New Blackfriars*, we have suffered from the social origins of our bishops. For a number of reasons they have rarely been drawn from the classes that have traditionally provided the setting for the English professional man. Take boys of a narrower upbringing, put them in the isolated and often alien setting of seminaries, and what breadth of mind, what community of ideas with educated men of their own country would they be likely to have? Or even to want to have? Concerning his fellow-students at the English College, the author writes that some were ex-Servicemen:

'These included Lance-Corporal Masterson who died as Archbishop of Birmingham and the one-time Sergeant Griffin who became Archbishop of Westminster' (p. 63).

Precisely. We have indeed had the worst of both worlds—all the constriction of Dissent without its vigorous instinct for popular consultation; all the prelacy of the Established Church without its national and cultural heritage.

Such a system will provide its adherents with simple and tangible loyalties to causes that touch in the first place the system itself, such as loyalty to the Holy See or denominational schools. Concerning all that there is no ambiguity in the book nor would the author welcome any. But he and his fellow-Catholics have paid the usual price for such brisk certainties: they have proved themselves liable to be disconcertingly unaware of issues that do not touch their

system directly. For a sombre instance of this myopia we can go to the author's narrative of a controversy in December 1940 with the *Jewish Chronicle* (pp. 247-254). His replies to the newspaper attributed reasons for anti-Semitism to the 'disproportionally large number of men who are Jewish by race but not by religion' (p. 250), specifying membership of the Communist Party and avarice as examples (pp. 250, 253), while also stating that the reasons were specious (p. 252). Looking back, he describes his final letter as sounding patronizing, but perhaps tolerable in those emotional war-time days (p. 254). The reader may well feel that, even if the sense of his replies were less doubtful, there might be more appropriate times for arguing with Jews about anti-Semitism than 1940, but a year later finds a similar situation. At the request of the *Catholic Herald*, the author visited Ireland (North and South) to gauge attitudes to the war. I do not envy him his sad task, but what (among much else) emerged from his enquiries may be gathered from a comment, once more in the *Jewish Chronicle*:

'Whether the publication of the pro-Nazi, anti-British, and anti-Jewish sentiments attributed to Irishmen is calculated to help or impede the national war effort is, however, another matter . . .'  
(p. 244).

The author uses the latter incident as an introduction to the former: typically and tragically, he can see no connexion between them. The connexion needs stating.

Before the war, Roman Catholics in England combined an acceptance of its parliamentary democracy with a *penchant* for reminding their countrymen that there were other forms of government and that foreigners were not fools to prefer them. I am not concerned here with the wisdom of this attitude, only to link it with the self-interest of the Catholics themselves. At home, they and their forefathers had stood to gain by an extension of rights and privileges to the lower classes; abroad, their co-religionists had everything to fear from such extensions, which threatened the parts of society where they were the strongest. By concentrating the loyalties of English adherents upon the Church to which they belonged and to the defence of its rights, Roman Catholic belief proved all too compatible with an evaluation of totalitarian governments simply in terms of the degree of freedom they granted the Church. Concordats with such governments were a *pis-aller* because the Church had to make concessions and the governments might fail to keep their word. That, quite apart from religious persecution, such governments were monstrously evil, and that concordats with them were a paltering with evil, were opinions held by some English Catholics but by all too few of them. Most were content, once the Channel was crossed, to acquiesce in a complex of ideals, preferences and antipathies traditional among Catholics there and dominant among the higher clergy—legitimet, authoritarian, imperialist,

nationalist, anti-democratic and, of course, anti-Semitic. Their acquiescence was due to a failure that is to be found in this book—a failure to examine pre-suppositions. And what followed was an unarticulated acceptance of attitudes which, spelt out, would have been repudiated by many.

For it is no accident that the war-time Irish regarded Hitler as 'a great man gone wrong' and regarded him as 'a great gangster' only after the rape of Czechoslovakia (p. 236); or that, while deploring the persecution of the Church in Germany and occupied territories, 'they regard it as incidental in the programme of the Nazi régime' (p. 238). Just as it is no accident that the author, describing his visit to Germany in 1936, can write without comment, 'Most Germans realised by 1936 that the anti-Jewish drive had gone too far' (p. 185). It is no surprise, because the power of moral evaluation among Roman Catholics had been weakened by a concentration upon what may be called intrasystematic self-interest, leaving what was outside to the chance preferences of unscrutinized prejudice, and those who were outside to what mercy they could find there. The Jews who were persecuted by the Nazis had already been rendered invisible by Catholic tradition.

That the unexamined legacy of anti-Semitism can co-exist with goodwill towards Jews, denunciation of their persecutors, and a desire for better relations with them, is no more than an instance of my general moral—that personal kindness, although precious, is not enough. It needs to be set in the wider context of the determination to 'do the truth in love' and to remove all ambiguity and darkness that can impede that truth and that love. The removal may be less exciting than care for individuals but it is just as much part of charity.<sup>1</sup> Failure to remove will lead to failure in the very kindness that was regarded as the *locus* of moral concern. Geniality without understanding may damage unwittingly: but the damage may still be great. I have no wish to labour the point about a man who has worked far harder for the People of God than I ever shall, so I will give it specific content by instituting a comparison between two great churchmen whom the author rightly esteemed: Cardinal Hinsley, and George Bell, Bishop of Chichester. It is a parable for all of us.

I detect in Hinsley's lovable sincerity that flaw of restrictedness I have detected in the work under review: a willingness to let a pragmatically convenient policy stand in for a deeper examination of what is at stake. Intense in loyalty to the Holy See as well as a lover of his own country, Hinsley frankly expressed his discontent at the Italianization of the Curia; but he did not—could not—question the morality of Pius XI's horse-trading with Mussolini or

<sup>1</sup>Note how, during his Irish journey and its moral uncertainties, the author put his finger at once on two evils: social injustice, and a rift between priests and people. In such appraisals of personal morality he speaks with a justified assurance; it is there that he feels most at home.

the extreme mutedness of Pius XII's condemnation of what Hitler was doing to the Jews. I am not blaming him: apart from anything else, papal encyclicals provided him (as they provided the author) with anti-Nazi ammunition, even though they were, alas, composed with a much more restricted aim, and even though Pius XII was prepared to give the Germans a very great deal of rope for being anti-Bolshevik.<sup>1</sup> The formation Hinsley had received did not allow him to go further; and it allowed him, while condemning the Nazi barbarities towards the Jews, to talk of (I follow the author here at page 225 of his *Cardinal Hinsley*) 'the Jewish problem', to trace anti-Semitism principally to wickedness characteristic of some wealthy Jews, and 'he could not forget that there are more priests than Rabbis in the concentration camps of Germany, Russia and Poland'. (The author's words were written in 1943, by which time it was already known that mass slaughter had taken place.) It is all a matter of priorities, and of what one chooses to see; one of Hinsley's last writings was a rambling and passionate denunciation of contraception as the origin of social evils (*ibid.*, p. 217).<sup>2</sup>

Bell had been a pioneer of Christian Unity: he had found more sympathy for it among Roman Catholics abroad than at home, but he had persevered and it was he as much as anyone who (as the author rightly points out) preserved Anglican contact with the 'Sword of the Spirit' movement at a time when the Roman Catholic hierarchy had made that almost intolerable (*Cardinal Hinsley*, p. 200). But Bell's work for Unity had shown him something of the resistance to Nazism among some Christians in Germany. He was able to preserve contact with them, and it was to Bell that Dietrich Bonhoeffer disclosed in 1942 the nature and extent of the German resistance-movement against Hitler. We know that the movement failed and that the Allies refused moral support or sympathy to those who gave their lives to it. The fact remains that Bell saw what a Christian should do and saw it with an enviable breadth of vision; the wide world was his parish. He showed the same breadth, and showed it at the cost of personal obloquy, when he spoke out in the House of Lords against our policy of indiscriminately bombing German cities. Bell had his own fads and limitations; but in the presence of his awareness and range of contact we seem light-years away from the whole cast of mind which informed his great contemporary and which discloses itself in our author.

What's the answer? I do not see why there should be one. We are all living more than we did under *la force des choses*, and the

<sup>1</sup>I wonder if the most disturbing factor in the whole controversy over Pius XII's reticence is always appreciated. It is not that he kept (or did not keep) silent; it is that, with the rarest of exceptions, nobody thought the issue worth raising until Hochhuth's play. The C.T.S. then published a pamphlet defending Pius; but only then. It took a long time to see that it was his business.

<sup>2</sup>To move down to a very different moral level, the Irish priest Fahey was able to publish, with an *Imprimatur*, poisonously anti-Semitic works, the second of which appeared when the death-camps were known to be operating. Who condemned him?



points of initiative and renewal are even further away from churchmen than they were in Hinsley's day. The limitations of bishops matter less now because bishops matter less. That there is profound dissent among us about the rôle of the bishop, just as there is about the rôle of religion, is obvious enough. If, in the light of this book's lessons, advice has to be given to those who differ in our own country, mine would be this. In the first place, opinions among Roman Catholics may very easily be polarized by an excessive attention to slogans favoured by this or that group. Any pattern of religion sits loosely to its formularies precisely because it is the vehicle of something greater than what can be formulated: that Christians do not live up to what they say is at times a consolation. Secondly, each group needs to be aware of its limitations. Thus, the minority which looks for a radical re-appraisal should remember that it is a minority and that it has a long way to go before it becomes a viable one. (Thus, an eminent member of the English Hierarchy felt obliged not so long ago to offer help to *New Blackfriars*. Which is rather like fining St Stephen for leaving litter.) But the majority, and especially its leaders, the bishops, needs to acknowledge the depth of the dissent and to stop supposing that it can be overcome by genial ambiguities of the very pragmatism to which the dissent takes exception. The disagreement is not over presentation, but over content. In the last analysis, public relations are not enough.

I cannot myself think of a more disastrous belief today than that a confrontation with the past need look for nothing beyond a more tactful presentation of the *status quo*. Judgments on our inheritance may differ, but unambiguous judgment—and where necessary rejection—there must be if we are to 'do the truth in love'. Still those who think otherwise need expect no interruption of their policy—yet. Indeed (and we are already entering this stage), the voice of dissent is going to diminish rather than grow louder. An increasing number of dissenters will just be voting with their yawns.

## Carry on Calepin

### by Louis Allen

#### *Racism. I. The death of an Arab*

There's nothing very poetic about the title 'XVIIIe arrondissement', but it contains districts with a claim to poetic nomenclature as strong as that of the *Rue du Chat qui pêche* or *The Land of Green Ginger*. One of them is the area called *la Goutte d'Or*, though its surroundings are far from rich and far from poetic. It is, in fact, one of the many