

## REVIEWS

BROTHER NICHOLAS: A LIFE OF ST NICHOLAS OF FLUE. By George Lamb. (Sheed and Ward; 8s. 6d.)

In *Brother Nicholas* George Lamb has set out to write a short, popular biography of the recently-canonized national saint of Switzerland which would match the saint's own character in its simplicity, directness and lack of the affectations and pretentiousness which too often seek to pass themselves off as learning. Up to a point he has succeeded: the cackle at the beginning is most admirably cut, and throughout he is commendably anxious to come to the point; but unfortunately he has not been able to avoid the pitfall of this method, because so often, having begun *in media res*, he has to go over what he has in anticipation told us when he reaches the appropriate place in his story, producing a tediously repetitive effect. Another danger to which those who write the lives of the great, of this world and of the next, expose themselves is that they cannot help also drawing for us their own characters: and Mr Lamb, in his determination to approach this mysterious figure from the Gothic past as a plain man of the twentieth century with no nonsense about him, sometimes reveals himself as capable of trite and trivial observations while he surveys for us the medieval scene. He is much to be applauded in his refusal to make the case of Brother Nicholas more difficult than it need be, or to be fascinated by it for what would be, for the man in the street, the wrong reasons. Nicholas has already gained some celebrity, in the writings of Thurston, for instance, as a classical case of *inedia*: Mr Lamb does not detain us with any unduly long account of the many years in which the saint lived with no bodily sustenance save the Host; nor does he pay any special attention to the even more technical and complex question of how the saint, totally illiterate, overcame this obstacle in learning to achieve an advanced and subtle speculation upon the mysteries of the Faith. But those of us who already know Brother Nicholas, especially if, like Mr Lamb, we have had the good fortune to go to Sachseln in Unterwald to his shrine, and to sit in his hermitage in nearby Ranft and listen to the blessed silence of the solitude which Nicholas chose, will find that in this present treatment, along with the scientific problems and the unsolved questions, the awful strangeness to us and to the created world which was the outstanding characteristic of this simple ploughman and soldier turned saint has disappeared too, leaving us with an oddly insipid residue. Many learned studies of Nicholas have already appeared in Switzerland. Mr Lamb seems to be well acquainted with most of them, although one cannot be sure of this, since he

gives no indications of the modern sources of his information, for the benefit of those who can read German and may wish to go to these authorities themselves. Much remains to be done, especially in revealing the literary antecedents of Nicholas's contemplations (and it must be said that Mr Lamb's few general remarks on this topic are shrewd). But meanwhile the Swiss have also produced some outstanding popular books about him: admittedly, they are more expensive books than could perhaps be produced in England; but still some of their methods and their material might with advantage have been used. To make a modern man grasp what Nicholas was and is, nothing could serve better than a sight of one or two of his surviving images and portraits made either in his lifetime or very soon after his death in 1487: the long emaciated form and the terror-struck face which those who saw him so vividly described, are singularly ill portrayed in the bust which serves as frontispiece to this volume. Then, if we are to understand and to feel the mysterious world of image-symbols through which Nicholas's untutored mind found a path to the light of the Godhead, we should see a reproduction of one of the strangest relics of medieval piety, the picture which he caused to be painted to help him in his contemplation. The picture is fleetingly described by Mr Lamb, who presumably saw it hanging in the church of Sachseln; but he has not shown its vital connection with Nicholas's story of how he was taught 'the points of the Passion'; and one must beg readers not to imagine that the crude wheel-like diagram depicted on this present book's dust-jacket has any real resemblance to the Sachseln picture. Altogether, this is a disappointing work, doubly so because one is left with the feeling that, given the means, and a conviction that the saints of the Middle Ages are still able to speak to us in their own tongues, the author might have written something which would adequately express the greatness of his subject, and which would have told us truly why, as he so movingly writes at the end, St Nicholas of Flüe is 'one who left wife and family and all that he loved best, so that he could become a brother to all men'.

ERIC COLLEDGE

TWO PORTRAITS OF ST TERESA OF LISIEUX. By Etienne Robo (Sands; 9s. 6d.)

A purely naturalistic interpretation of everything in a saint's life that is not obviously supernatural has the great advantage of simplicity and logic. Father Robo has attempted something of the sort with the life of St Teresa of Lisieux and has succeeded admirably. Plane away everything which is due to exaggeration, then everything which is due to uncritical admiration, then everything which may have two interpretations, one marvellous the other ordinary, and you reach