

## REVIEWS

## ENGLISH CHRISTIAN POETRY

The Oxford University Press, in producing their book of *Christian Verse*,\* have departed from their practice of arranging the anthologies they publish by temporal periods, usually of a century, or by languages. There has, hitherto, only been one exception to this rule, the *Book of Mystical Verse*; in this volume, however, they have overstepped the boundaries of time though not of language, for the reader of the *Book of Christian Verse* will look in vain for any poem not in the English language.

The editor, Lord David Cecil, has gathered a brilliant galaxy of poems, the great majority of which are not only authentically Christian in feeling, but are also great works of art. Whether one reads the limpid simplicity of

I sing of a maiden  
That is makles,

or of Reginald Heber's

By cool Siloam's shady rill;

or whether one delves into the great shadows of the soul in Donne's

Batter my heart, three-person'd God,

greatness is there, all the range of Christian feeling, of Christian love, whether it is the mediaeval man singing

Of a rose, a lovely rose,  
Of a rose is al myn song,

or a Jacobean divine, complex, mature, erudite and passionate, wrestling in the sublime and terrible conflict of soul and body.

Indeed, in turning the pages of this book, one is constantly surprised by the persistent alliance of brilliant poetry with Christian orthodoxy. There is a *prima facie* case for believing that doctrine could hinder that free outpouring of the soul which is

---

\* 'The Oxford Book of Christian Verse.' Ed. by Lord David Cecil, (O.U.P. London: Humphrey Milford 8/6 net.)

essential for great poetry. But it is not so. Indeed, the poetic fervour, the tone and colour of great poetry, seem in these pages to augment and intensify as the poet has the more gloriously and fully incorporated into himself the doctrinal bases of Christianity. Especially is this true of the root-doctrine of the Faith, the Incarnation.

We saw Thee in thy balmy nest,  
Young dawn of our eternal day,

breaks out Crashaw, leaping at this inspiration far beyond the more moderated tone of his poem on St. Theresa. There is an amazing intensity in Dunbar's 'Of the Resurrection of Christ,' with its trumpeting exordium,

Done is a battell on the dragon blak,  
Our campoun Chryst confoundit hes his force;  
The yettis of hell are brokin with a crak;

so too Hopkins, of whom the editor says that 'he conveys with extraordinary fire and immediacy the more full-blooded religious emotions,' should surely be distinguished less as a 'virtuoso—a natural juggler with words,' than as one whose devotion to the Person of Christ pours out in an unquenchable torrent of speech, the lyrical obscurity of the lover. The same feeling inspires the noblest lines in that passage from 'The Testament of Beauty' with which the editor closes the book:

Thus unto all who hav found their high ideal in Christ,  
Christ is to them the essence discern'd or undiscern'd  
Of all their human friendships; and each lover of him  
and of his beauty must be as a bud on the Vine  
and hav participation in him;—

Where, on the other hand, the doctrinal basis has grown faint, the verse seems to sink in quality and intensity of feeling and, immediately after a noble excerpt from Dryden's 'Religio Laici,' which expressly treats of the inadequacy of natural religion and the sole adequacy of the Incarnation, one finds a 'Hymn to Darkness' by John Norris of Bemerton, which begins

Hail thou most sacred venerable thing!  
What Muse is worthy thee to sing?

This is surely a poem whose inclusion in a book of *Christian* verse is difficult to explain? Again, in the darkest nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold, in a long and dreary poem called

'Rugby Chapel,' apostrophizes his great father's qualities and declares :

—to us thou wert still  
cheerful and helpful and firm—

the Good Stoic in a nutshell. But these are rare exceptions in a volume of poems whose excellence and Christianity are alike outstanding.

There is, it is true, another strain of religious thought to be noticed in the poetry of England, and that is the worship of God in and through His works.

The spacious firmament on high  
With all the blue ethereal sky,  
And spangled heav'ns, a shining frame,  
Their great original proclaim,

writes Joseph Addison, in one of the noblest examples of this religious *genre*, and one finds an echo of it in a minor key in a charming 'Pastoral Hymn' by John Hall :

Yet do the lazy snails no less  
The greatness of Our Lord confess.

There is, indeed, a danger of pantheism in all this, a danger from which later English poets have not escaped, not even perhaps Wordsworth, who is surely rather ill-represented here by 'Devotional Incitements.' This is, it is true, a religious strain not altogether incompatible with a full realization of the Incarnation, but it does, in practice, lead to emphasis on the natural instead of the supernatural, and to a subjectivism which is the enemy of the truth. It seems worth while, in conclusion, to emphasize this point, for it is a recovery of the sense of the Incarnation which is most essential to the England of 1940. We are fighting against a system based on a lie, using the lie as its most powerful weapon, and aiming at establishing a lie on the throne of the world. To that system we have to oppose not a mere denial, but something positive, a truth, *the Truth*, the Word made Flesh, the divine Verity breaking in upon the world of nature. That alone can give us the answer to the opposing lie, the standard around which to fight, and the fundamental inspiration to ultimate victory. Abandoning our less noble strains, we must urge again the fact and the significance of the Incarnation and go on doing so until

Done is a battell on the dragon blak.

Paul Urban Foster, O.P.