

BLACKFRIARS

Fr. G. J. MacGillivray in *SAINTS YOU OUGHT TO KNOW* (Burns Oates and Washbourne; 6/-) has thought of what the "critical" might say, but his own attitude is perhaps the most popular nowadays: "I shall probably be told by critics that I have followed untrustworthy legends, that the earliest account of such and such a saint was written a century or two after his death, and it is rather doubtful whether he ever existed at all. Such criticism will leave me cold. In any case, this scorn of tradition and rejection of all that is not vouched for by contemporary documents is not so much in fashion as it was. . . ." Fr. MacGillivray has provided a very readable compendium of better known lives, and a valuable introduction on friendship with the Saints: "we all have our friends on earth . . . why not make friends in heaven too?"

Still, *all* approaches to saints' lives can lead to reflection on the *principles* governing these heroic lives, and thought of the achievements of grace, fruitfully realized in a myriad ways. In this *genre* is *THE SPLENDOUR OF THE SAINTS* by Fr. Aloysius Roche (Burns Oates and Washbourne; 3/6). Perhaps less in harmony with the rest of this book is its advocacy of vegetarianism. We would agree with Fr. Roche that "a rational diet is a Catholic diet"; but might hesitate to assert that "Catholics ought to be in the very vanguard of the Food-Reform movement whose line of advance is after all in the direction of our Catholic tradition and the example of our Saints."

There are no limited, set, moulds for sanctity; holiness is "wholeness" in its most profound sense—notions admirably developed in *DIVERSITY IN HOLINESS* by Fr. R. H. J. Steuart, S.J. (Sheed & Ward; 6/-), a series of capital essays (some have previously appeared in *BLACKFRIARS*) wherein we are spared a mass of biographical details and treated to an admirable insight into the workings of the Spirit breathing where He wills both in Saints who have been and in those who are yet to be canonized. This is undoubtedly one of the best "spiritual reading" books of the year, eminently recommendable, combining theological depth with freshness of style, and giving much to think.

ROLAND POTTER, O.P.

THE DESERT FATHERS. Translation from the Latin with an Introduction by Helen Waddell. (Constable; 7/6.)

"There is perhaps no phase in the moral history of mankind of a deeper or more painful interest than this ascetic epidemic. A hideous, distorted and emaciated maniac, without knowledge, without patriotism, without natural affection, spending his life in a long routine of useless and atrocious self-torture, and quailing before the ghastly phantoms of his delirious brain, had become

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the ideal of the nations which had known the writings of Plato and Cicero and the lives of Socrates and Cato'. . . It is with this comminatory surge in his ears that the average reader opens the *Vitae Patrum*"—the pen, the pen of Lecky, the subject, the Thebaïd. The preparation is unfair, for Stylites was not typical; his "tormented and preposterous figure belongs to the decadence." Yet, even so, the charge against the desert is deeper and broader than this: "the root of the quarrel between the humanists and the Desert is not the exact length to which the branding of the flesh may legitimately go. What ailed Rutilius and Gibbon and Lecky is the Roman civic conscience: and to the Roman civic conscience the exiles in the desert are deserters from a sinking ship, fugitives from a rotting civilization, concerned only for their personal integrity. Augustine had the civic conscience: the sack of Rome sent him to his book of reconstruction, a city that had foundations, whose builder and maker is God, but a city that could be built on the rubble of the Empire, even as Blake would have built Jerusalem among the dark Satanic mills." It is the perfect example of "the uncompromising otherworldliness," as Mr. Dawson has put it, "of the monks of the desert . . . represents the extreme development of the oriental spirit of asceticism and world-denial within the boundaries of orthodox Christianity. For the naked fasting ascetics of Nitria and the Thebaïd, the state and the world of social duties had ceased to exist. They had cut themselves off from all social ties; they recognized no political obligation." That cult of individual invulnerability of which Jerome remarked that "whoever attained to that pitch of insensibility was either a stone or God" reduces in fact to egoism; solitude for the sake of finding God may be a necessity, but it does not cancel the social duties.

Has the Thebaïd done anything for man? This book is proof that it has, despite its theory—rather, despite one side of its theory, for "inhumanity to oneself had often its counterpart in an almost divine humanity towards one's neighbour . . . the Desert has bred fanaticism and frenzy and fear, but it also bred heroic gentleness," while its "denial of the life of earth has been the incalculable enriching of it . . . the sense of infinity is now in our blood."

Gentleness towards man and beast, the sense of eternity, of these two things the present volume eloquently tells. The selection is intended to be "neither comprehensive nor quintessential"; by that very fact Miss Waddell has been able to make of her excerpts a string of jewels. Her Introduction is a precious thing, whose grace bears its learning lightly; each group of excerpts is preceded by an introductory note in which her familiar skill brings the old authors to life with a deft touch of anecdote and allusion, or fires a historical discussion with lyricism; the translation breathes the

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gentle grace which is the joy of these lives, and through it makes cogent "that part of the Desert teaching most alien and most sovereign in a world that has fallen to the ancient anarchs of cruelty and pride." GERALD VANN, O.P.

MISCELLANEOUS

THOMAS CRANMER OF CANTERBURY. By Charles Williams. (Oxford University Press, London. Milford; 10/-.)

This play is written for production in the Chapter House, Canterbury, and is therefore to be judged as a work of dramatic art provided for an intellectual Anglican and eclectic audience. But when a poet writes a play concerned both with religion and history it has further aspects, each of which demands a separate appreciation. The author as poet may deserve praise forfeited by the author as dramatist, he may accurately represent historical incident but get misled in his deductions therefrom, he may have Latin but lack theology, he may be often right but wholly wrong.

Quotations will help the reader to form an opinion of the poet. The climax of Cranmer's death is a fair sample and others will be given:

The Skeleton: I am equated now to his very soul:
I am his equilibrium; Thomas, speak.

Cranmer (kneeling): Blessed Omnipotence, in whom is heaven, heaven and earth are like offended at me!
I can reach from heaven no succour, nor earth to me.
What shall I then? despair? thou art not despair.
Into thee now do I run, into thy love,
That which is all the cause thou wert man for us,
and we are nothing but that for which thou wert man,
these horrible sins the cause of thy being man,
these sins to thy love the cause of motion in love,
where is stayed no sin nor is merit of ours marked,
nor aught can live but the hallowings of thy Name,
through which thy kingdom comes, in earth and heaven
thy will being done, the bread of which be our food.

The Skeleton: And I lead you all from temptation and
deliver from evil!

If this has not the rhythm of Shakespeare and is difficult to classify as verse it cannot be denied a life which trained elocution will enhance upon the stage. Here is wit and wisdom, good book which is halfway to good theatre.

There is fine craft in achieving the Unities—thirty years with the deaths of two kings and several queens focussed to the manageable problem of two hours.

The Singers (Chorus) are presented as a kind of background to