

insists on the fact that the privileges we enjoy as Catholics carry with them certain obligations to society and to our fellow men. Here there is much criticism, but never of the ill-natured destructive sort, every word being written with profound sincerity and loyalty. In conclusion Fr Levie sums up the whole situation in an Epilogue, 'I believe in Jesus Christ', a magnificent confession of faith.

No teacher or student of apologetics can afford to miss this valuable book. It is by no means easy to read, especially the chapter on 'Belief in order to think rightly', which is very condensed and difficult to follow; also, the fact that the various chapters were written at different times has caused a certain amount of discontinuity and repetition. But anyone who is prepared to make the necessary effort and possesses the intellectual stamina to persevere to the end will find his time well rewarded.

DROSTAN MACLAREN, O.P.

THE DRY WOOD. A Novel by Caryl Houselander. (Sheed and Ward; 8s. 6d.)

Naturally enough we open Miss Houselander's first novel with more than customary expectation and perhaps with some presuppositions. That she is a poet with a strong sense of the communion of saints we already know. Perhaps we shall be disposed to look for 'influences' and we shall not be disappointed if we consider that a profitable search. There is the Bruce Marshall strain; for that matter there is also the Churchillian strain: we hear of blood, sweat and tears more than once. In this fashion we might find whatever we care to look for in any novel and remain blind to the unique thing that it is. The unique thing that this novel is gradually grows in our minds as we read on, and in this respect the work resembles, to use Miss Houselander's own image, those Japanese imitation flowers which we used to buy and watch unfolding in a glass of water. By the time we reach the twenty-second out of twenty-four chapters we are quite certain and the two remaining chapters have a Delius-like quality inasmuch as they fade us back into the whole world of which this story took and examined one part. That is Miss Houselander's first achievement.

She chooses to take a cross-section of the life of the Church as the subject of her novel and therefore, her first difficulty will be to keep the reader's feet firmly planted on the ground while his head is among the stars. Because she is a poet she surmounts this difficulty for the poet sees the eternal in the temporary and insignificant: the death-bed of a child of five is truly an altar of immolation and his parents are truly sacrificing ministers. But because she is a meditative poet she does not always succeed. She stops to browse too often. Browsing is good and necessary but it can make the novel uneven, not because it holds up the narrative but because it means that our eyes are held too long on one object in the landscape and we are in danger of losing our sense of proportion. This is a serious defect, but it is one that can

only be expected in a first novel. It arises most likely from over-anxiety and its absence might have been a bad omen for the future. The same anxiety is perhaps responsible for her too heavy underlining in places. We are given the impression that she cannot sketch economically, but this is not true as the excellent sketch of the apostasy of a Jewish family (ch. 16) proves. The impression is made, I think, by a certain self-consciousness about imagery which makes her anxious to focus our eyes on it by gesticulating. One example might be taken: '... silence returned to the room, falling flake by flake on the Archbishop's soul, as snow falls flake by flake on the world'. Now if the last clause were omitted the whole sentence would be stronger and more serene, and we should not be irritated by what looks like fussiness and over-anxiety to make the picture clear. None the less Miss Houselander has the gift of economy and when she does use it she guides our eyes skilfully over the terrain focussing them at the right time on the right spots.

Yet again she is not always content to let the truth speak for itself; her meditations too frequently become didactic and she appears anxious to underline her capital letters. Not that all didacticism must be cut out; much of it is good, as, for instance, Donna Rosario's teaching at Monsignor Frayne's dinner party. But then Donna Rosario is one of the characters who speak for themselves. The tendency to turn the characters into transparent instruments on which the author pipes her tune leads us to feel we are being talked at. We are often conscious that it is Miss Houselander that is talking and not Timothy Green or Fr O'Grady. Somehow she doesn't always manage to project her thoughts outside herself into her characters, and the writer often intrudes (obviously unwillingly) between reader and text. Perhaps that is partly because she has a limited number of things to say and after a time we begin to recognise her themes. After all the themes of the symphony of God's creation are inexhaustible. On the other hand it is the penalty that the poet-novelist often has to pay. The poet, especially the lyricist, moves in circles retracing his steps again and again, and because he is a poet the infinite depths of the significance of his tracks are never exhausted. But when he enters the realm of novel writing he must be as concerned with the shape of the tracks as with their spiritual significance. That is to say that though he does in fact reiterate he does so through different mouths and as a novelist he is as much concerned with the mouths that speak as with the words uttered. His characters must live and they must be varied. It is only to be expected that Miss Houselander, a poet, would have difficulty in making her characters self-subsistent. Again she has by no means failed—witness Solly Lee, Donna Rosario and Monsignor Frayne—but there is a general tendency to turn them into puppets. This is brought about, in part at least, by a looseness of style and poor prose rhythms. Far too often we find ourselves wading through a catalogue of epithets and expressions which does nothing to keep the thought moving. There is little variation of light

and shade in the prose rhythms and the result is a sadly uniform grey.

Here again it is necessary to point out that Miss Houselander is not simply a careless writer who has so far got away with it by writing meditative prose in an uncritical age. She has in fact a great gift of imagery—doors closing 'gently like a secret'; a flower girl's 'bonfire of chrysanthemums'; 'the soft wash of people's voices'. She often chooses the epithet that brings you up short: 'shy moustaches'. Time and again she holds back and packs her punch into the last phrase of a paragraph. Irony and wit are all there, and though they often need polish to give them rapier sharpness they are sometimes delicate enough to leave us wondering whether perhaps she has her tongue in her cheek. Despite all this however her prose remains loose and it must be admitted that it sometimes comes undone and falls down into the otiosity of 'awful china' and 'dreadful washstands'. This slackness is responsible for much of the lack of differentiation among the characters and for the impression left with us of an instrument not quite sharp enough. A similar slackness allows her to leave simple inaccuracies in the text: heavy make-up (so I am told) does not 'flake off' under the influence of tears (p. 21); presumably it is on his beat and not 'on point duty' that the footsteps of the policeman were heard by Timothy at night (p. 91). Perhaps these criticisms seem petty and they would not indeed be worth noticing except as symptoms of a deeper carelessness which does harm to a fine book.

All this criticism however would be both ungenerous and unjust if it were not pointed out that the book is great enough and strong enough to deserve severe pruning and that for the safety of future novels it is worth while. Moreover any estimate would be completely untrue if it were not at the same time pointed out that these defects are only one side of the picture. In fact they are not even one side; they are merely flaws in a very good novel. It is not a Marshall or a Waugh; it is first of all written by a woman. And so we look for the attributes of a woman novelist. We shall not find a Jane Austen, but we shall find many of the qualities that make female novelists unique; tact, depth of understanding and sympathy, a wit that is finer than a needle. But above and beyond all these qualities we shall find a feeling for a truth which most novels never seek to reveal: a feeling for Eternal Truth wrapped in the cloths of Riverside. There lies Miss Houselander's greatness. She sees Christ in the saintly priest and in the guttersnipe. Because this is true greatness she can get away with much that is artistically defective; and because this is the greatness of Christianity itself it is only right to desire the removal of the defects.

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