

CAMBRIDGE SERMONS

THE TRUE WILDERNESS. By H. A. Williams. (Constable, 16s.)

It is not always remembered that, before Mr. Williams gained some notoriety through his remarks in "Soundings" and "Objections to Christian Belief," he wrote two short books, rather less sensational and both very good indeed. One, chosen as a Lent book by the Bishop of London, was entitled "Jesus and the Resurrection"; the other, "God's Wisdom in Christ's Cross," was a penetrating study in Pauline theology.

These earlier writings are worth recalling in case publicity should incline anyone to dismiss Mr. Williams unread and to be content with a second-hand image of him. They will not find that he has been totally misrepresented, but they will at least see the ratio between the purple passages and the rest of his theology and may well discover, perhaps to their surprise, that he has some important things to say.

Scots Fuzz

THE FINDLATER SISTERS. By Eileen Mackenzie. (John Murray, 21s.)

FOR anyone who finds a nostalgic enjoyment in the novels of Mary and Jane Findlater, the two gifted daughters of a Highland manse, here now is their biography. These two good-looking sisters were all in all to each other in a devoted relationship which made superficial any idea of marriage. Together they emerged from the obscurity of their Scottish home at the turn of the century, and took their place in both the English and the American literary scene.

Miss Mackenzie has done an enormous amount of research — every literary or social acquaintance has been given a biographical footnote — but, and sadly, it is to little purpose. The Misses Findlater remain in two dimensions. We are told that they were delightful and intelligent company, and we will take Miss Mackenzie's word for it.

She has tried hard, but never do her two charming novelists make any greater impression on the reader than those hazy Edwardian photographs which fuzzed out every wrinkle and left all those women with piled-up hair and large hats looking just too good to be true.

At his best, indeed, he is a most penetrating writer. And there is much of his best here, where a number of sermons preached in Cambridge have been collected together. True, there is not the variety of theme, the illumination of a wide

By
J. S. BOWDEN

range of questions, which is sometimes brought by similar collections. One subject—or, rather, complex of subjects—predominates. But that complex is so fundamental to the understanding and living out of the Christian faith that it can hardly be stressed too much.

God is to be looked for in what we are, in our personal experience. Our life, our real, inner life, is no better than a wilderness. We try to disguise it with riches, pride in possessions, status, anything to conceal from ourselves the true condition. We refuse to die to ourselves, and so fail to experience the miracle of resurrection, when we are shown riches far beyond those to which we tried so pathetically to cling.

This recognition lies right at the centre of Christian theology, and it is here given pertinent and moving expression, which always comes directly from the experience of the preacher. It makes this a book not to be missed.

But (and this qualification must be

made, even though the passages to which it relates are so disproportionately brief) what a pity the whole impression had to be marred by two asides which add so little to the sermons in which they come. No one is likely to miss the point of the allusion, "We can be nearer to God in Tangier than in Canterbury." It is still less satisfactory than in its original form because the vagueness is increased, while functionally it is simply another red rag to a (justifiably!) infuriated bull. But enough ink has been spent on it already.

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WHAT, however, is one to make of this? "Go into a Lyons teashop with a friend. As you eat your bun together and drink your coffee, surrounded by a crowd of people, Lyons is Emmaus. Christ is present in this breaking of the bread."

John Betjeman's poem, "In a Bath Teashop," is quoted immediately afterwards. The poet gets away with it because he leaves almost everything unsaid. The preacher has said enough to confuse, not enough to make a perfectly legitimate point clearly. As it is, the result is disastrous, because the Emmaus imagery has been given no clear point of reference. Lyons could be, in certain circumstances (which would have to be described very carefully) Emmaus; equally it could not. But "is"? One wishes this sort of thing were simply omitted.

Fifty Eventful Years

ENGLAND IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: 1914-1963. By David Thomson. (Jonathan Cape, 30s.; Penguin Books, 5s.)

DR. THOMSON, the Master of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, is one of the most accomplished of contemporary historians, and his "Europe since Napoleon" has long been recognised as a standard work. His new book, originally commissioned as a sequel to his "England in the Nineteenth Century" in the Pelican paperback "History of England" series, is a remarkably fair-minded and balanced and comprehensive survey which it is difficult to fault at any point.

Essentially it is "an unravelling of the events and their consequences which accumulatively turned the England of Asquith into the England of Macmillan." The historical narrative is divided into three parts: from the Great War to the Great Depression (1914-29); from World Crisis to World War (1930-45); from Welfare State to Affluent Society (1946-63).

No country had enjoyed "the Great Peace" between 1815 and 1914 more than Britain: none was liable to suffer more deadly damage from "the Great War" of 1914-18. Yet it must be remembered that there were many dangerously disruptive trends in our

national life before the outbreak of hostilities, and it is arguable that nothing short of a flagrant threat to national security could have united the British people in concerted support for a single policy. So also, if war had been avoided in 1939, Britain would still have had to face tasks of economic overhaul and social reconstruction resembling those which confronted the Labour Government in 1945.

The two pivotal dates of world history during this period were 1917 and 1941. In 1917 the United States entered the war, and six months later the Bolshevik Party came to power in Russia and made peace. In 1941 Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, and six months later the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour. Both these dates registered decisive displacements of power to which Britain has had to adjust herself ever since.

Yet, as Dr. Thomson points out, size, power and wealth are not the only criteria of progress. "A Britain of relatively less military might in the world is not self-evidently a worse country than before; nor is the more affluent society of the 'sixties necessarily better, spiritually or culturally, than the Britain of 1914, which certainly knew more social injustice."

THOUGHTS ON DEATH

DOORS OF ETERNITY. By Sibyl Harton. (Hodder and Stoughton, 16s.)

THOUGHT and reality can be overwhelmingly different. The author of this book once planned, enthusiastically, to write about death. Death was then to her emotionally exhilarating, a new excitement. "I was going to write about death, death lovely and precious, serene and holy, not diminishing but perfecting, death welcome. I was in love with death."

But, not long after, death came to a close relation. And for a time the book proved impossible. Only after a number of years did the author feel that she could write about death experienced, and the book she has written is certainly not what she would have produced in her eager innocence.

Although it is inspired by death, the

idea of death, the prospect of death plays a relatively minor part. Nor is there a great deal of personal detail. This is deliberate, as the author feels that any experience has to be "recollected in tranquillity" before it can be raised above the narrowly personal and reveal its universal value and relation.

So the chapters consist of a series of meditations on Christian themes: glory, suffering, sacrifice, detachment, redemption, separation, death, and again glory. They are well, if at times somewhat artificially, written in the Catholic tradition; the best pages are extremely good and make up for the occasional purple passage of oratory.

It is a pity that the author could not have written sooner after her experience; inevitably time has robbed her reactions of some of their freshness, as well as beginning to heal the wounds.

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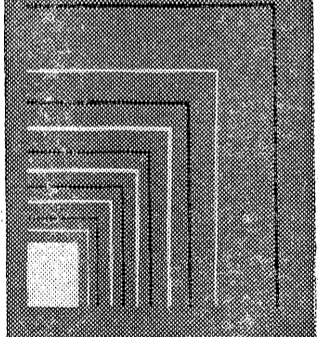
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THEOLOGY AND PREACHING

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