

THE
EDITOR'S TABLE

Constable

A SHORT while ago a Constable painting was sold in a London auction-room for more than twenty thousand guineas. Yet though he began to paint in 1795, Constable did not sell a single picture to a stranger for close on twenty years. Of course he was a rebel against the conventional school of landscape painting. His subjects were not the romantic chasms and mountains, castles and ruins; he wanted—to use his own words—to paint the English landscape without “fal-de-lal or fiddle-de-dee.” It was not till after his death that he attained any measure of popularity or honour in his own country.

The first real encouragement came from abroad in 1824, when “The Hay Wain,” was exhibited by a Frenchman in the Salon, where it aroused interest and no small degree of excitement. In France the revolt against pseudo-classicism had already started, and Constable received a gold medal from the French king for his picture.

It is certainly true that Constable met with many disappointments and set-backs during his lifetime. It is certainly true that he might never have persevered but for two things—the faithful love of Maria Bicknell, whom he married in 1816, and the steady and loyal encouragement which the Fishers gave him. To this family Constable and English painting owe a great debt.

In his new book* Mr. R. B. Beckett traces the history of these friendships, and in particular the painter's friendship with John Fisher, Bishop of Salisbury, and his nephew and namesake, the Archdeacon of Berkshire. They were both men of wide humanity and understanding, and—which was useful too—men of influence and importance. The Bishop had, in his earlier days, been private tutor to several personages of distinction.

It is occasionally possible, if one is careless, to confuse him with his nephew. It would have been more convenient to Constable's biographers if the Bishop and the Archdeacon had been endowed with different Christian names! It is with the Archdeacon that Mr. Beckett's book more particularly deals, and it comes to an end with the year of the Archdeacon's death in 1832. Maria had already gone, and though Constable survived his friend by four years it is clear that he lived on as a lonely and broken man. He went on, however, to the end bravely enough. Not every man of genius would have endured the disappointments of life so courageously and patiently.

Mr. Beckett's book consists chiefly of letters which passed between Constable and the Fishers. Many of them are now published for the first time. They give a most interesting picture of life in the Cathedral Close and in country vicarages—a life less harassing than that of to-day, no doubt, but perhaps less stimulating. “Enthusiasm” was still unfashionable.

The most interesting letters are those of the painter himself. He tells of his family affairs and of his pecuniary troubles, of his professional set-backs and vexations, of his artistic theories and ambitions. “At a dinner I gave, I was obliged to sit for an hour patiently and hear Fuseli criticized and found fault with—and this from a party of men clever in their own way. . . . These men would not have criticized a clock or a spinning Jenny, because they do not understand those pieces of machinery. And yet they will teach a painter.” Whistler would have agreed. Then the authentic Constable again: “How much I wish I had been with you on your fishing excursion in the New Forest! What river can it be? But the sound of water escaping from mill dams, willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts and brickwork—I love such things. . . . As long as I do paint, I shall never cease to paint such places.”

*John Constable and the Fishers. By R. B. Beckett. (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 25s.)

RIVAL CLAIMANTS FOR MAN'S LOYALTY

CHRIST AND CULTURE. By

H. Richard Niebuhr. (Faber, 21s.)

In this important book, Professor Richard Niebuhr follows his more famous brother's example in making a fresh and original contribution to theology. The book is based on the Austin Lectures delivered by Dr. Niebuhr in Texas in 1949. Its subject is accurately signified in its title, and the writer's method is in the main historical. He surveys the various answers which have been given by Christian theologians down the centuries to the question of the right relationship between Church and State, the Church and the World, Christ himself and the whole of man's cultural effort and achievement.

Dr. Niebuhr begins with a praiseworthy effort to define his terms. He sees Jesus Christ as the man characterized by a uniquely radical faith, obedience and love, with his every virtue intelligible only as a living relation to the living God. But he firmly rejects any humanist view of Christ's nature, and insists from the outset that his claim over the allegiance of men comes from him as Son of the Father. He was both man living to God, and God living with men. As for “culture,” Dr. Niebuhr refuses to limit it to any definition in merely Western terms, or with reference to any one department of human achievement. Culture in this book is used in the widest sense, to imply that total result of human activity which men call “civilization,” the whole of that artificial secondary environment which man has succeeded in superimposing upon the natural. Culture is the whole of man's social environment. Dr. Niebuhr sees the conflict between the two realities in terms of the Christ who leads men away from the temporality and pluralism of culture, the culture which rejects the Christ who bids men rely on supernatural grace alone. In one sense it is true to say that the whole of Christian theology has been the infinite dialogue about the rival claims of culture and of Christ. Dr. Niebuhr interrupts this dialogue at five points, to present five distinct Christian answers which have been given to his question.

The first answer is “Christ against Culture,” a complete antithesis between the claims of God and of the world. Dr. Niebuhr takes Tertullian and Tolstoy as typical, among others, of this view, which insists on emphasizing the opposition and antagonism of Christian faith to civilization. Proponents of this view call on believers to “come out from among them and be separate.” Dr. Niebuhr criticizes them on the ground that this way of looking at things inevitably exposes men to the dangers of a spiritualism which is really a denial of the authority of the Incarnate Christ.

Recognition of a fundamental agreement between Christ and culture is typical of the second answer, given by those who speak of “the Christ of culture.” They see Jesus as the apex and climax of human achievement and aspiration, who confirms all that was good in the past and guides the process of civilization to its proper goal in his perfect kingdom. Dr. Niebuhr takes Abelard as a typical exponent of this view, so exactly contrary to the first. He is not wholly just to the supernatural emphasis which is found in much of Abelard's thought. But there can be no quarrel with his criticism of this second answer as one that has hold on only a third, at most, of the truth of Christ.

Dr. Niebuhr proceeds to distinguish three further answers to his fundamental question. These all agree with each other in seeking to hold the two principles, Christ and culture, together in some degree of unity and harmony. But they differ in the way in which they seek to combine the two. There is the view which Dr. Niebuhr calls “Christ above culture,” which he associates with the name of Aquinas. According to this view, Christ is indeed the fulfilment of cultural aspirations, but he is also so far above this world that a great leap of faith is necessary to reach him. Dr. Niebuhr argues that this view fails to do justice to the radical evil inherent in all human effort and life. This evil is emphasized in the fourth answer, associated, in Dr. Niebuhr's argument, with both St. Paul (in certain moods) and with Luther. This view (“Christ and culture in paradox”) accepts an inescapable opposition between Christ and culture, but holds that unhappy men have a duty to obey both these antagonistic authorities—man lives in the tension of a citizen of two opposed worlds, subject for the time being to two rival authorities. Dr. Niebuhr argues that this dualistic view of the matter leads to an evil conservatism, which is only too ready to acquiesce in society as it happens to be. Finally, there is the fifth answer, which Dr. Niebuhr terms *conversionist*

—“Christ the transformer of culture.”

This recognizes the inherent opposition between Christ and all human institutions, necessarily imperfect as they are. But for this view the antithesis does not lead either to Christian separation from the world, or to mere endurance of the antagonism. Christ is seen as above all culture, and yet also as the converter of man and his society from evil to the perfection of the heavenly kingdom. The outlines of this answer are found by Dr. Niebuhr, correctly, in Augustine. He pursues them through Calvin, Wesley and F. D. Maurice, of whose position he gives an able and sympathetic account.

It will be seen that Dr. Niebuhr's book covers a great deal of important ground. The least convincing part is, unhappily, his final chapter, in which he makes a tentative statement of his personal views. This statement lacks clarity. It leans in the direction of a confused, if fashionable, existentialism, and for that very reason appears to be tenuous and uncertain. Dr. Niebuhr appears to admire Kierkegaard's views. Many who will read and admire this book, must hope that before long Dr. Niebuhr will throw off the influence of that gloomy and misty-minded Dane.

RELIGION AND REASON

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION. The Impact of Modern Knowledge on Religion. By Fulton J. Sheen. (Longmans, 25s.)

This book by the auxiliary Bishop in the Roman Catholic Diocese of New York is readable, comprehensive, well-documented and persuasive. The author says, quite rightly, that many books on classical philosophy (by which he means the “*philosophia perennis*”) fail to equip a reader in the problems relevant to the present situation, and leave him helpless to argue with any man who does not use the same terms.

His own book is an admirable example of how the argument ought to be presented: it would be good propaganda among middle-brows. His exposition of the immanence of God is excellent. But he is not quite successful in avoiding the common error of thinking that a scientific universe consisting of electric particles or waves is less “materialistic,” in the sense of more “spiritual,” than one made of hard, impenetrable atoms. And although it is true that “mathematics” ignores both final and efficient causes, it is far from true that Eddington, Quaker as well as great mathematician, did the same thing. Mgr. Sheen's flat declaration that the truth of the Christian religion rests on miracles and prophecies gives an eighteenth-century touch to this otherwise modern-minded book, and his assumption that revelation is infallible information about God and dogma really needs some defence, after all that has been written on that theme during the last thirty years.

His general subject is essentially the same as that of Mr. Arnold Lunn's book, “The Flight from Reason,” but his treatment is more comprehensive and systematic. He presents the Christian and common-sense tradition as the golden mean between irrationalism and the crude Cartesian and mechanistic substitute for the classical reason. His whole treatment makes it clear that “reason” is more human and richer than reasoning or intellect or logic alone. But he also justifies his own amazement that people still think that the Church is the enemy of reason.

Father Douglass of Behala, from which we recently printed a series of extracts, has now been published by the Oxford University Press (10s. 6d.). This is a fine study of a great and humble priest of the Oxford Mission to Calcutta, written with taste and discernment by “some of his friends.”

SOCIAL WORKER

BEATRICE WEBB'S DIARIES, 1912-1924. Edited by Margaret Cole. (Longmans, 24s.)

THESE diaries take up the story of the Webbs from 1912, which was roughly the year when “Our Partnership” closed, and continue till 1924, when Sidney Webb became a Minister in the first Labour Government. The work begins, therefore, at a time when for various reasons—and not least among them, perhaps, H. G. Wells's “New Machiavelli”—the credit of the partnership was at its lowest, and ends when its success was sealed by office in the Government.

The diaries show the acuteness of Mrs. Webb's observations on men and affairs. Her personal criticisms are often caustic, but are usually justified by later events, her judgment on Oswald Mosley being remarkable for its prescience. On events she is not so unerring. She had the courage to put in her diary what she thought was going to happen, and her editor has had the honesty to leave her forecasts uncorrected, even when these were completely falsified.

The Webbs had little fun in their common life—at least what other people would call fun. The work of the hour was their absorbing interest, and their outlook was in consequence limited and a trifle humourless. Yet the diaries are not in the least dull. The comments are shrewd and tart. They sometimes have a touch of vivacity. And what the Webbs were doing, and had done, was really important.

Two reflexions naturally suggest themselves. One is that the quality of service they gave to the social causes they made their own was rare in its utter unselfishness. They were content to do the work and, while others took the credit, to go on to the next task. If they could ever have brought themselves to describe their idea of purgatory, it would have been a place where there was not a next task.

The other reflexion is on the fine quality of the partnership. The Webbs were completely happy with each other, neither desiring nor demanding any other close companionship. They shared everything as a matter of course—their work, their hopes, their thoughts; and their one dread was of what life would be to the other if first to be bereaved. They were not sustained by religion. Sidney Webb had no religious belief at all. His wife had certain vague general convictions. Sometimes she went to church, and the diaries show an odd affection for the services at St. Paul's. But “the character of Jesus of Nazareth has never appealed to me,” and though she writes of the Kingdom of God, she is evidently thinking merely of a perfected form of the Welfare State. The prototypes of husband and wife may have been noble Romans in the last days of paganism, who had lost their belief in the old gods, but had failed to accept the new revelation.

SHORT NOTICES

Mrs. Hessel Tiltman has written another delightful volume in continuation of her “Cottage Pie” and “A Little Place in the Country.” *The Birds Began to Sing* (Hodder and Stoughton, 15s.) is a charmingly discursive and happy book about country life, arranged by the calendar, and written with zest, delicacy and marked sensibility.

Soviet Atomic Spies. By Bernard Newman. (Robert Hale, 15s.) Besides an account of the activities of Dr. Fuchs, Alger Hiss, Dr. May, Dr. Pontecorvo, and other well-known characters, Mr. Newman gives a general survey of the Russian network of espionage, summarized from reports published at the time, and from the American Congressional Committee on Security. This is an important book by an expert on an alarming subject.

New Testament Literature

T. HENSHAW. This book gives, in the light of modern scholarship, the views on the authorship, date, and purpose of each of the books of the New Testament. 25s. net

Religious Dances

PROFESSOR E. LOUIS BACKMAN gives an account of the origins and history of religious dances and their significance in the Christian Church. Illustrated 35s. net

Sri Aurobindo and the Soul Quest of Man

NATHANIEL PEARSON makes an intensive study of Sri Aurobindo's great work—*The Life Divine* and gives his three steps to spiritual knowledge. 10s. 6d. net

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C. J. STRANKS

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The author of this book writes out of a long and deep study of Taylor's writings, and works with the exciting advantage of having at his disposal a considerable number of interesting facts about Taylor's life unknown to previous biographers. The result is a major study of one of the greatest figures in a great period in the history of the Church of England.

(Published for the Church Historical Society)

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with Special Reference to Jeremy Taylor

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CHRIST, THE WEST, AND THE EAST

GEOFFREY ALLEN

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THREE MEANINGS OF EAST AND WEST

A Sketch of the Impact of West upon East in the Situation of To-day

O. S. TOMKINS

1s.

Two pamphlets based on Lectures given at the Church Union Summer School of Sociology, 1951.

S.P.C.K.