

## REVIEWS

SURPRISING MYSTICS. By Herbert Thurston, S.J., edited by J. H. Crehan, S.J. (Burns and Oates; 18s.)

In a recent article on *The Foreseeable Future*, Sir George Thomson, Master of Corpus Christi, has expressed the opinion that 'the true fundamental relation of mind to matter is the deepest secret of the Universe' and he adds that an intensive study of extra-sensory perception (E.S.P.) is an essential preliminary to its solution. 'The evidence is good enough to produce acceptance of what is claimed were not such a fundamental upsetting of the systems of thought adopted by most moderns, and especially by scientists. . . . If true, it will produce a revolution in thought. . . .' All this is only one of many indications that the importance of Father Thurston's unique contribution to the study of abnormal phenomena may at last receive adequate recognition. The teaching of the Church leaves much room for speculation. Are these signs and wonders to be considered as charismata, or as Abbot Chapman has suggested, a return to the normal state of integrity of mind and body found in unfallen man? Or as a rare natural deviation?

Too often the value of studies of para-normal phenomena among Catholic mystics is vitiated because the writer falls into fatal initial errors, such as considering abnormal powers as evidence of sanctity; or examining only one facet of a mystic's life; or omitting rational tests of evidence. Father Thurston, learned in the vagaries of hysterics and psychopathics, widely-read in secular occultism, never forgot that whatever else E.S.P. is, it is no evidence of holiness or even of ordinary virtue but has often enough proved to be an occasion of sin. So much was he priest as well as scholar, so lovingly intent on the study of the mystic as a whole person, that these thirteen biographical sketches covering seven centuries remind one of a series of brilliant tapestries, peopled by figures almost alive. It is true that by the time he has done with their stories there is little enough of E.S.P. left, but that was only to be expected.

The most important paper in the collection is a long critical study of Anne Catherine Emmerich, which not only rehearses the almost incredible facts of this famous mystic's life, but contains general speculations on the nature of revelation in trance, still valuable after thirty years. The evidence that she possessed some degree of clairvoyance is very strong, but in view of the disastrous interventions admitted by Brentano (her amanuensis), I feel that the gigantic efforts expended in analysing this famous case have been largely futile, a view which the learned and tactful editor, Father Crehan, evidently shares.

Of the remaining papers, the marvels related of thirteenth-century Christina of St Trond, turn out to rest entirely on a credulous biography written forty years after the alleged events. Marie Julie Jahenny (who died in 1941) and claimed to exhibit stigmatization and an inedia of over five years, had powerful medical support, but the author considers her 'pathological rather than supernatural'. At least three others were certainly psychotics. The attractive Christina of the romantic 'Peter and Christina' idyll was only too obviously a chronic hysteric subject to long episodes of definite insanity; it remains a moot point whether genuine poltergeist phenomena were interwoven in her experiences. A very interesting group of pious women of the cloister combined remarkable wisdom in practical affairs with possibly genuine abnormal physical phenomena, and an even more extraordinary gift for weaving egotistical fantasies, obviously as an escape from severe mental tension. Whether the escape-mechanism took the form of a dictated autobiography or of a trance with revelations, seems largely accidental. A remarkable example was Maria Coronel de Agreda, Franciscan nun and valued friend and correspondent of Philip IV of Spain. She not only could be puffed about like a feather, but claimed to visit and convert natives in Mexico in a state of bilocation. (Had Teresa Higginson read her story?) Her work 'The Mystical City of God' which, she alleged, had received unique proofs of divine approval, 'must', says Father Thurston with unwonted warmth, 'awaken the violent protest of every student who possesses even the rudiments of historic training.'

The final paper on the 'False Visionaries of Lourdes' (based on Père Cros' 'Histoire de Notre Dame de Lourdes') is well worthy of attention. It has always astonished me that the true facts about the Soubirous family, and about the disconcerting flood of pseudo-miracles and bogus visions which followed rapidly on the apparitions to Bernadette, are so often either ignored or distorted in histories of Lourdes. As Father Thurston shows, much injustice has been done to the officials who acted sensibly and from the highest motives in closing the Grotto. 'The incident', he points out, 'in the Providence of God has only served to ensure the triumph of a true divine communication over a mass of hysterical counterfeits.' The capacity for distinguishing between divine communications and counterfeits is still required; it should be substantially helped by this fascinating book.

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THE COLOURED QUARTER. By M. P. Banton. (Jonathan Cape; 21s.)

The recent influx of coloured colonials into England has aroused a great deal of controversy and criticism. Yet of the millions who have