

# Reviews

**JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, A BIOGRAPHY** by Ian Ker. *Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988. Pp. xiii + 762. £48. Pb. £12.95.*

For more than three-quarters of a century Wilfred Ward's classic biography has provided the standard introduction to Newman's life and thought. Ker's *John Henry Newman, A Biography* can now lay serious claim to that position, a fact which invites comparison between the two works.

Ker himself notes three limitations in Ward's treatment: he 'covers the entire Anglican half of the life in little more than a chapter'; 'the picture he paints of Newman's personality is unbalanced and one-sided'; and, since Ward's time, 'many hundreds of letters have come to light which were not available to him' (p. vii). In Ker's work, by contrast, the events of 9 October 1845 fall almost half-way through (on p. 316 out of 745 pages of text, to be precise). Against Ward and others, Ker is anxious to defend Newman against the charge of being over-sensitive and to stress the 'masculine' rather than the 'feminine' side of his character. Dessain's magisterial edition of the *Letters and Diaries* is systematically employed; indeed, Ker footnotes it nearly 1600 times.

This use of the *Letters and Diaries* points to what is at once the book's strength and its weakness. Ker summarizes and paraphrases hundreds of letters, with enough quotation to fulfil his aim of 'allowing the reader to hear, as far as possible, the actual sound of Newman's voice' (p. ix). That voice is often amusing: the learned William Palmer, for example, is dismissed as 'like a walking folio, or a theological nine pounder' (cited on p. 295). And the content is often of great significance: this is true, for example, of the important statements of the 1870's on the function of the theological office in the Church (pp. 681–82, 690). But the net effect is at times like reading a sort of calendar of *Letters and Diaries*. And all of this is interspersed amid summaries—helpful and judicious summaries—of Newman's published works. The *Essay on Development*, for example, gets twelve pages (pp. 302–14) and the 1877 Preface to the *Via Media* gets seven (pp. 701–707).

Little else is cited explicitly. The impression that Newman left on contemporaries is seldom mentioned, save in connection with Newman's (often defensive) reaction. There is no bibliography, and the vast range of modern discussion of Newman's life and thought is sparingly cited. It is very much Newman's voice that we are allowed to hear.

More serious, perhaps, is the fact that the people who populated Newman's world—those to whom he wrote, with whom he lived, against whom he fought—remain little more than names. There is no attempt to provide the sort of prosopographical study which would make the world in which Newman moved come to life. Nor is the character of his relationships

explored. It is an area about which there has in the past been pointless and irrelevant discussion. But friends like St John were not irrelevant to Newman, and the everyday realities of the dynamic which was his life cannot simply be ignored. One wonders whether Ker's stress on Newman's 'masculinity' is some sort of refracted view of this discussion. In any event, the categories of 'masculine' and 'feminine', even in inverted commas, do not seem to be helpful, particularly when the 'masculine' is characterized (as on p. viii) by 'an astonishing resilience and uncompromising toughness in the face of adversity' and a 'kind of resourceful practicality'. The wider world is largely ignored, too, though it was, of course, changing radically in Newman's lifetime, and social and political change clearly impinged on his life and on his Church and left their mark upon his thought.

Ker might with reason say that all that is beyond his brief; a 750 page biography is already something of a 'theological nine pounder'. (It actually weighs 3lb. 3oz.) That is a valid choice. But it is a choice which defines human life, the *bios* of which he writes, in a particular way. This biography is a rich and valuable account of what Newman said and did; it faithfully records what he thought about different things at different times. But the man remains elusive.

Perhaps that is the sort of biography Newman deserves. He did, after all, record in the *Apologia* his 'thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator'. And for all his introspection Newman was such an intensely private man that his reflections on the former of those two subjects, at least, were always coy, if not reserved.

Was the man whose biography this is (and whose centenary we now celebrate) a saint? Newman himself thought not. It was 'those who are at a distance', he said, who 'have fee-fa-fum notions about one' (p. 350). Ker thinks that Newman was at least a prophet: his work contained 'an exact prophecy' of Vatican II (p. 684; cf. pp. 662, 743) and 'anticipated' many of its 'central themes' (p. viii). He notes, with seeming approval, its designation as 'Newman's Council' (p. 411). Vatican II, in fact, pulled the teeth of Newman's later ecclesiology. When the radical implications of that thought are at last appropriated, it may be possible to re-evaluate the question of Newman's prescience and of his sanctity. It may then be found that more 'fee-fa-fum' notions of the man may be entertained and that a more 'fee-fa-fum' life may be written.

PAUL PARVIS OP

**THE ACTUALITY OF ATONEMENT by Colin E. Gunton, T & T Clark 1988. Pp. xiv + 222. NP.**

Professor Gunton sees a study of atonement as particularly needed at the present time, which has been characterised by one recent writer as a time of 'The Abandonment of Atonement' (p. xi). But the abandonment, even on the British scene alone, should not be regarded as so complete as that suggests in view of the recently published books by Paul Fiddes and Richard Swinburne. Moreover at least two other books by British scholars are well advanced in preparation. But his own contribution is none the less welcome