

. . . WE HAVE ALWAYS WITH US

THERE are some books whose line of approach sets up a train of thought in the reader's mind. Quite apart from their intrinsic value, their very existence calls attention to some great problem, and only the more urgently when the problem is as obvious and the method of approach as honest as the day. In *I Took Off My Tie*¹ Mr. Massingham has written a book of singular integrity and clarity of purpose; a book which has some of the clumsiness arising from profound honesty. Few writers succeed in attaining to such perfect unselfconsciousness as this author. The subject described is the life of a group of tenants in two or three houses in a side street in the East End. The book, as was almost inevitable from its subject, has suffered extensively at the hands of reviewers and has received a good deal of rather treacly praise. By some papers it has been regarded as a document or a sign and as other tiresome things. Mr. Massingham's treatment of his subject is non-sentimental rather than un-sentimental, and a writer of less integrity would have suppressed the character of little Annie Morgan knowing how the childhood of the poor throws the British Public off its balance. *I Took Off My Tie* is a record of actual experience and the author shared, in so far as he was permitted, the lives of the people he describes.

The situation is one which possesses its own inherent impossibilities, for there are really only two alternatives. One may be taken as an "observer" from another social world, and that cannot be the prelude to intimacy, or one may be regarded as an outcast sinking through one's own depravity, and this cannot lead to any measure of respect. That this should be so is really not regrettable, but is in some respects rather encouraging as evidencing the "resolved privateness" of English life. None of the characters in the book appear to have been Catholics either in actual fact or by submerged tradition, and there is no discordant element in his description such as Catholicism might have introduced.

¹ Heinemann; 7/6.

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But to pass from the book to the question. How far is Catholicism in England divided into these zones? If the zones exist does any one succeed in penetrating them, do the priests, do the laymen?

The following suggestions are thrown out tentatively as the result of a somewhat limited experience. In the first place the parish priests (whether secular or religious) in an industrial area have a definite place and an acknowledged right in the life of the community and they are always, on sufficiently official occasions, welcome. The prevailing sentiment would still welcome the presence of a priest at a death-bed. But what if one has not got a bed? That is the crux of the situation. It would seem that the line of cleavage establishes itself between those who have a *regular* tenancy of a room or rooms and those who have not. In the first case a certain standing in the neighbourhood is assured. There are rights and obligations. If a family with children is concerned, the school may provide a certain link between the mothers. The head teacher will appear as an inevitable public character binding together all those who deal with her (or him). It is at this point that priests certainly possess a great advantage. They are paid for by the people and are not clamped down by any public authority. Some of the money of the family goes in outdoor collections and in the plate and some to the public house. Is it too much to hope that there is an air of intimacy engendered in the gathering together of the coins for these so personal expenses? In the old days it was not the priests who raised the most money who were the least popular. An old Catholic woman sitting beside the hob is proprietary in her attitude towards the school for which she paid in school collections for so long. It was one of the strengths of the industrial Catholicism of the nineteenth century that the schools and churches were the people's. They had paid for the benches and the heating, and subconsciously through their Irish respect they did not forget that they had also paid for the upkeep and the very presence of their priest. It is pleasant to remember the proprietary pride that the Catholic poor have had in the lungs of the mission preachers.

The paternalism of the last generation among the clergy bound priest and people close together. Their fortunes were interdependent and interlocked in those days before the rise of the Labour Party when they had no more genial saviour than Mr. Gladstone. The long, unending, rooted pastorates may not have made for efficiency, but they certainly did make for that use and wont which issues in affection. There was a warm feeling for the old landmark as he strode by in his top hat. And it was in the red baptismal registers of the Manning period that the genealogies of that section of the populations which had come across after the Famine were contained. There was something of a chosen people, some hint of the Jews in Egypt about these close-knit colonies; the priest whom his flock understood so well, and then, remote and alien and only too beneficent, the Pharaoh of Victorian government. But if that was true of the 1880's, how far is it true to-day? It is a difficult question to answer. Possibly it still holds good of certain parts, but this is the result of the workings of grace rather than nature. Again a great body of the clergy have now a clear realization that it is the industrial areas which, so to speak, matter most, where most can be achieved and where the penalties of neglect appear most serious. The desire for holiness seems very frequently in this generation to issue in an explicit wish to serve the poor. At the same time it has been a hard change over in many areas from that old paternalism. It is easy enough to say that we require in this generation a more resilient sympathy, but it is difficult to explain, even to oneself, what one means, and it is still harder to imagine the practical measures in which this would issue. Perhaps what we all need is the apostolic spirit, the desire to serve the image of God in the faithful, the resolute determination not to function slowly as cogs in a machine, and that freedom which we can only gain by not being self-regarding. But this must be driven further, the quiet and sheltered virtues can only serve to repel the shelterless. The modified organization of the calm and ordered possession with which we are familiar in the life of the Church is admirably arranged as a background from which the clergy can act on those who live frugally or moderately within the

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established system. But to deal with the possession less adequately would seem to need a lack of possession.

It does not seem that the submerged population, those without status, can easily be reached by our present methods or by any flexible variation of them. For the homeless one would need a complete absence of material ties such as some of the first friars envisaged. As matters stand the seculars, Dominicans and Franciscans are perhaps equally near to and equally remote from an intimate contact with the really destitute. This is not in any way to belittle the very real sacrifices which the vow of poverty entails on those called to the religious state, but it is a fact of experience that those who best appreciate the sacrifices of religious poverty, as we know it in this century, are the middle classes and not the very poor.

It is inevitable that organization of religious life should tend to grind away that complete and, so to speak, irresponsible poverty that is associated with the name of St. Benedict Joseph Labre. It is not this that is especially required today, for that chosen destitution which, perhaps, can alone provide full companionship for those in profound poverty will be allied in the Catholic mind with an ultimate determination to attempt the formation of a society which shall have no outcasts. But surely a great work could be achieved if some of those vowed to a religious poverty shared the destitution of the poorest of Christ's poor. Meanwhile for all those who are called to work among the Christian people we need a profound sympathy with the unprivileged and an acutely critical discernment in regard to the various political remedies which are offered to us. It is a help to us if we are naturally sceptical of the offerings of the ambitious. We should be hurt, too, by windy phrases.

The same difficulties that apply to the priest in his approach to the really destitute equally affect the layman. Freed as most Catholics are from sentimentality, how much we should wish to possess a prayer-driven desire for truth. It is good to realize that the situation exists even if we can only guess at the remedies.

D.-G.