

the human race is usually silly when it is not sinister. His story dispenses with the discipline of a consistent plot, and the adventures of Martin Foxglove, son of a doting mother set on good works, pass from a thinly concealed Catholic public school (which will cause little pleasure at Downforth, one supposes) to the Army and hospitals, with country-house and (unconvincing) Elephant and Castle interludes. There is a cleverness in the writing which by no means compensates for an insensibility which can make fun of madness and deformity. A hateful ending makes it difficult for one to do justice even to its incidental, adolescent merits.

Mr Cronin is a much more experienced writer, but he has scarcely the right to demand our attention for 450 pages in which he traces the improbable career of Dirk Vidal, a poet who is sent down from Oxford and who wanders from Florence to Paris, from South America to the Lebanon, where he takes up gun-running and gets deeply involved in a love-hate relationship with an Italian girl who shares his own failure to conform. (She, one might almost add 'of course', had refused a religious vocation.) This picaresque, and often heroically conceived, story is thought by Mr Cronin to require a degree of sexual adventure (and hence of detail in describing it) which is unacceptable. The novel would be twice as good if it were half as long.

PEREGRINE WALKER

### NOTICES

In *FOUR ABSENTS* (Barrie and Rockcliff, 13s. 6d.), Mr Rayner Heppenstall has collected his memories of four celebrated men who were once present in his life: George Orwell and Middleton Murry, Eric Gill and Dylan Thomas. These do not really make a book to themselves and Mr Heppenstall's attempts to find or make artificial links between them betray this. The glimpses of Dylan Thomas boozing add nothing new to our knowledge of him; the encounter with Eric Gill may be told honestly but is one-sided and contains certain elements wholly distasteful unless they are balanced and interpreted by a knowledge of the profounder side of his thought and practice. The accounts of his longer and more complex friendships with George Orwell and Middleton Murry are less frivolous but the divergences between his own memories and the extracts from Murry's diary which he very honestly includes undermine one's confidence in his own objectivity. The best thing in the book is an attempt to assess the motives of Dylan Thomas in the last hours of his life: as a whole, used very cautiously, the book will be of some use to literary historians of the thirties.

*THE AGE OF MARTYRS*, by Giuseppe Ricciotti, translated by Anthony Bull, c.r.l. (Geoffrey Chapman; 24s.), is an excellent account for the average intelligent reader of the most momentous fifty years in the history of the Church, from the persecution attributed to Diocletian, through the conversion of the Empire, to the Council of Nicaea and the death of Constantine. It is clearly written and it uses only the assessments of recent scholarship, not legend. The personalities of the emperors, the mixture of

motives, the fluctuations of the persecution temporally and geographically are clarified. The sources of the Acts and Passions of the martyrs are analysed and only the genuine relied on. The portraits of the saints, the apostates and the lucky are scraped clean, buildings and battles are surveyed, and the whole picture which emerges from fifteen hundred years of pious varnish is fresh and satisfying.

THE LADDER OF VISION. 'A Study of Images in Dante's Comedy', by Irma Brandeis (Chatto and Windus; 25s.). This well-written book is 'designed to show the ways in which Dante's meanings are fused in his images', i.e. to show the greatness of the *Divine Comedy* as a work in which intellect and sensibility combine to a degree which is perhaps unparalleled in world literature. The book is on the right lines and should delight those who approach the poet as a poet and not as a lofty but mystifying medieval doctrinaire.

THE LATER MIDDLE AGES, by Bernard Guillemin (Burns and Oates, 'Faith and Fact Books', no. 76; 7s. 6d.), is a useful sketch of a depressing period in the history of the Church. The decline of the medieval Church is exposed without any apologetic evasions. The point of view is naturally rather French. The Christian element in Italian humanism is underrated.

WRITERS AND CRITICS is the general title of a new series published at 3s. 6d. each volume by Oliver and Boyd. Of the first four, three are introductions to modern poets of considerable stature. *Robert Graves* by J. M. Cohen is the least satisfactory, probably because his verse depends little on extraneous systems or theories which need explanation. But *Ezra Pound* by G. S. Fraser, and *Wallace Stevens* by Frank Kermode, though necessarily brief, are satisfying and helpful, clarifying at least the major difficulties for those coming fresh to the work of these two important poets.

THE LIFE OF ST CATHERINE OF SIENA, by Ed Raymond of Capua, translated by George Lamb (Harvill Press; 25s.), is a good version of the main source (apart from her writings) for what we know about this marvellous woman. The homeliness and sincerity of her biographer, who was also her constant companion and confessor, come through perfectly. There is a wise and charming introduction by Fr Thomas Gilby, O.P.

THE OCCASIONAL SERMONS OF RONALD KNOX, edited by Philip Caraman, S.J. (Burns and Oates; 42s.), complete the presentation of Mgr Knox's preaching, which was reviewed at length in the June issue of BLACKFRIARS.

MID-WALES (Faber; 12s. 6d.) is the latest of the Shell Guides, which have so revolutionized the conventions of the guide-book. A text by David Verey does justice to the hidden beauty of a largely unknown territory, and, as usual, the photographs are fresh, and sometimes strange.

LAST CRACKS IN LEGENDARY CLOISTERS (Sheed and Ward; 10s. 6d.) is the third of Brother Choleric's mordant surveys of English religious life as seen through the eyes of an English Benedictine. His drawings are as diverting as ever, and his captions are splendid.