

## REVIEWS

CHESHIRE, V.C. *A Study of War and Peace*. By Russell Braddon. (Evans Brothers; 12s. 6d.)

The Victoria Cross is usually awarded for some specific, outstanding act of bravery in war. In Group Captain Leonard Cheshire's case this was not so; it was awarded (according to the citation) for 'a record of outstanding achievement' over a period of five years in one hundred missions during which he placed himself 'invariably in the forefront of the battle'. This present volume does much to illustrate that basic perpetual courage which has made Cheshire outstanding not merely in war but also in peace. It is not strictly a history of his war achievements; that has been done elsewhere, as for instance in Paul Brickhill's *The Dam Busters*. It is something far more valuable, namely the portrait of one of the most impressive characters of our time. It is the epic of a great yet essentially simple soul in search of truth, of the truth to be found in and through objective reality and not merely in the mind. His war record which established for him, in a phrase from his citation, 'a reputation second to none in Bomber Command', was in a sense inevitable, granted the circumstances, for it was an outcropping of his basic integrity which caused him to disregard both danger and fear, all personal desires and discomforts, selfish motives of every kind, in accomplishing what was required of him. It was not that he was a natural stoic or ascetic; on the contrary he thoroughly enjoyed his pleasures when they seemed to him legitimate, and at the same time he was more than ordinarily sensitive. Nor was he then moved by any sense of religious obligation. During the war he was concerned before all with the destruction of the enemy—until he was sent as an observer at the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki.

If I write of him in the past tense, it is because (to quote the present author) 'as he watched the writhing cloud, obscene in its greedy clawing of the earth, swelling as if with its regurgitations of all the life that it had consumed' Cheshire suddenly sensed all that it implied. In 'one monstrous ten-millionth of a second' he died in mind and was born again. 'In that split second of nuclear fission came the greatest moment of truth in his life.' It was not, in fact, his greatest moment of truth, but the author, 'not anything in particular of any religion', could not be expected to know this, notwithstanding his profound appreciation of the new Cheshire after Nagasaki. But that appalling moment did entirely re-orientate him in his search for truth. In

Cheshire's own words: 'When Wilhelmshaven blew up we felt a sense of elation. We had set out to destroy and we had destroyed. When Nagasaki blew up we felt nothing but an overwhelming sense of awe, not because an unusual number of Japanese had been killed but because something had happened which altered our fundamental concepts of life.' The flash that destroyed forty thousand Japanese was for him the light from heaven which temporarily blinded Paul on the road to Damascus; hitherto he had known nothing of God, but from now on he would seek him.

His search led him immediately into 'practical, non-sectarian Christianity, communal living and international idealism'. He brought the vision and courage of his war achievements to the saving instead of destruction of his fellowmen. His 'colony' scheme (known as V.I.P. or *Vade in Pacem*) was one of his vigorous practical efforts. It failed; but his vision and courage did not fail; and in a special sense, as far as he himself was concerned, it did not fail, for it brought him into touch with Arthur Dykes, one of the 'colonists' and also a former L.A.C. in the Royal Air Force, who was dying of cancer without family or friends to comfort him or even a bed to die in. Cheshire took him to his own home, Le Court, and nursed him personally and alone till he died. 'At night we used to talk a lot', Cheshire told his present biographer, 'very strong R.C., Arthur was—often discussed religion—and then Arthur would read a bit, always seemed to be the same book.' When his friend and patient had died, he himself started to read the old man's book. 'It was called *One Lord, One Faith*, by a man called Vernon Johnson. . . . It was good, because either everything it said was true or everything it said was false.' He was received into the Church on Christmas Eve, 1948; he found the supreme revelation of God in the Incarnation; this was his greatest moment of truth.

His contact with Arthur Dykes had another immediate effect; he had been in fact the first guest of the hundred now housed in what have come to be known as Cheshire's Homes, provided by him for the paralysed, the aged sick and the mentally disturbed. His work for his fellow men in need, which was now his work for God, continued and continues, in spite of an unexpected blow which would have completely disabled any ordinary man. In 1951 he was discovered to have pulmonary tuberculosis; from then until now he has been almost continually in sanatoria and has undergone four major operations. Yet, to quote the volume under review, 'these were the circumstances that were to be the background to the most productive period of his life'. Just before he had fallen ill he had determined to tour the country on what would have been, in fact, a preaching mission. Had that been possible the results might well have been epoch-making. I myself was

privileged to hear him on one occasion, soon after his conversion, when he gave a talk on the spiritual life to Catholic senior officers of the R.A.F. The depth of his perception, the quiet power of his words, and above all his shining sincerity, produced a most heart-searching effect upon all his hearers; and incidentally it made this member of the Order of Preachers feel very humble and inadequate. Yet let it not be thought that he had become any sort of grim and inhuman fanatic; his charm, his wit, his laughter, his human understanding are all called in to his service of God.

As he could not pursue his original plan, he used whatever equipment he could beg or borrow (having no possessions of his own) to carry his personal message over the countryside. His three buses, equipped with a tableau of the crib, a cinema and a recorder bearing on its tape his own earnest words, taken around London and the provinces by willing coadjutors, have proved most effective and fruitful. He would like to have a thousand such buses. He is never disheartened, but he is filled with an insatiable longing. 'Anything you want?' casually asked a visitor to his bedside. 'Yes—an aeroplane!' replied Cheshire, V.C. He wanted it to fly regular contingents to Lourdes so that they might share the 'magnificent experience' which he himself had profited by. That is only one of many schemes. For the one great end, which is to bring all men to God—or, perhaps better, to bring God to all men—he is prolific of ideas. His biographer records a number that have already been realized in the last eighteen months. He goes on: 'In the next eighteen months doubtless there will be even more. And in the next eighteen years the whole of Britain will probably be incorporated in the Cheshire Foundation! Who cares? It might even be a good thing, anyway.' His trust in Divine Providence is sublime. When he is in need of money for one or other of his apostolic projects 'he relies absolutely on a blind and terrifying faith that it will come. . . . And always . . . when it has been needed so far, the money (usually from a stranger) has arrived. It has happened so often now that even the accountant is beginning to assume that it always will.' (p. 208.)

This is a most outstanding book about a most outstanding character. The fact that it is written by one who professes no allegiance to any religion, though it prevents the author from appreciating the deep inwardness of Cheshire's Catholic faith, nevertheless lends all the more force to his estimate of the unvarnished positive results of that faith. It is admirably produced and liberally illustrated with very fine photographs. For any reader *Cheshire, V.C.* will prove a thrilling story of war and peace. For a Catholic it will also prove an inspiration and a stirring example.

HILARY J. CARPENTER, O.P.