

THE ACTON-NEWMAN RELATIONS, *The Dilemma of Christian Liberalism*, by Hugh A. MacDougall, O.M.I.; Fordham University Press; \$5.

Edmund Bishop said that a convert needs to make a double somersault: the first—into the Church—is not enough; and Acton is one of those writers who demonstrates why the second somersault is necessary. Those converts who are pre-disposed to enter the Church when they wake up to the gap between their public attitudes and private sentiments are an easy prey to arguments from tradition. These, by blurring the distinction between a mere cultural conservatism and that dogmatic conservatism which makes and keeps one a Catholic, lead one to suppose that a loyal Catholic is one who is necessarily a classicist, an authoritarian, a dedicated singer of old Catholic drinking songs, or just a passive brooder over a vanished Brideshead.

From this kind of arrested development, Acton awakens us as with a giant's hand. He brings out what Catholics of his own generation, and even of ours, were only too willing to suppress: the political inevitability and deep theological need of the permanent separation of Church and State, if the Church is properly to prepare itself for converts, or fully to take part in the ecumenical dialogue.

Yet, notwithstanding, Acton remains a puzzle. At some point, in some direction, he seems to go too far. A man who can come to speak of the Papacy as the fiend skulking behind the crucifix, and of his religion as being his flag, but politics his creed, makes us wonder whether, if he had been born out of the Church, he would ever have been able to think his way into it.

It is here that Acton's relations with Newman are so important, since in the confrontation of the political analyst with the theologian there emerges a solution to our own dilemmas; but this can only be provided if a proper balance is kept between the attitudes of the two protagonists. It is Dr MacDougall's achievement to have done so in the book under review.

His verdict on Acton is just: that he 'tended to regard the Church more as a political and educational organization than as a society primarily concerned with the salvation of sinners'. Only in the later writings of Newman is there to be found a satisfactory resolution of this deep apparent paradox within the Church's structure; and it is significant that, as Dr MacDougall points out, Acton's copy of *The Grammar of Assent* still has its pages un-cut. His mind was speculative rather than philosophical—a point which has been noticed by commentators as various as Professor Butterfield and George Tyrell—so that the portrait of Acton which emerges from a closer study is of one who thought too exclusively in political categories, who was almost entirely a public figure—too buttoned-up, too inflexible to allow even for Newman's sense of humour. Thus when Newman spoke of a Dominican's wishing to burn the ebullient Simpson for 'his abrupt, unmeasured attack on St Pius V', the remark takes on sinister overtones, and Dr MacDougall observes that Acton relates the story at least four times in his notes. Similarly, Newman's position that 'a ruder people

asks for a strong imperious teaching, armed with temporal sanctions, and such is good for it, whereas other ages reject it, and it would be bad for them' was seen by Acton as justifying intolerance—or worse; yet he gave his favourite daughter the complete works of Newman as a Christmas present five years after Newman's death.

The love-hate relationship between Acton and Newman seems best explained if we remember something of a similar sort between Rogers and Newman in the crucial days of the Oxford Movement. On both occasions Newman was being judged as a potential *political* leader, which it was not his vocation to be, rather than as a great theological innovator, which, for us, he still is.

We admire Acton for his persistent protests against a religious observance disjoined from a sense of social justice; but the strain under which he had to live is seen especially in his letters; these, moreover, testify to a lonely rather than an insensitive mind, to a man who, to a greater extent than is healthy, had to educate himself. What he lacked was what Newman so richly possessed: that power to clarify concepts, to limit the question, and to work over it critically yet temperately, which is the hall-mark of the best type of university mind. The confrontation is not only that of political analyst with theologian, but of autodidact with don. There are some excellent and revealing notes on University Education which Acton made in 1857, when he was twenty-three, in which he speaks of a university as 'nothing without a faculty of theology', and of ecclesiastical studies as 'lame without connexion with the universalities of studies . . . In this way it (the university) would be a bond between clergy and laity'.

Newman's attempts—so successful in other cases—to forge such a bond with Acton, at least in terms of human relationships, did not succeed; and the consequences of this increasing isolation from his fellow-Catholics are shrewdly assessed by Lady Blennerhasset who, in writing of Acton in 1886, said: 'There is perhaps nothing more dangerous than being fenced in morally by a hedge of superior specimens of the race, as for example the Athenaeum Club, and then proceeding to judge or legislate for mankind standing behind the hedge.'

The struggle for a more liberal Catholicism undertaken on our behalf by Acton, Simpson, Newman and others during the last century is gradually but unwillingly beginning to seem important to us. How unwillingly can be gauged not only by the way in which analyses of the events and principal characters can still be published that add to, rather than dispel, the misunderstandings in which the struggle is still enveloped, but in the disquieting but hardly surprising fact that this exemplary study of the Acton-Newman relations, supervised by Professor Butterfield, should have failed to gain an English publisher. It is a balanced, scholarly and indispensable introduction to a topic which, until it is properly evaluated, will stand like some threatening spectre from the past demanding to be exorcised before we can be permitted to emerge from what is already beginning to seem a state of arrested adolescence.

JOHN COULSON