

SAINT TERESA AND LESSER MATTERS¹

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Interest in Saint Teresa of Avila is almost as inexhaustible as that in the little saint Thérèse. Publishers time and time again risk their money—and that is saying a lot these days—upon works dedicated to a study of some aspect of her life and works, and, having done so once, they do it again! Here we have Messrs Burns and Oates, after recently publishing the Letters, now producing a life translated from the French of Marcelle Auclair. Faber and Faber have brought out a posthumous series of essays upon her, and other matters, by E. Allison Peers. Publishers are wise in their own generation. Why? Because Saint Teresa sells. There is that *no sé qué* about her which is everlastingly attractive. She is not a saint with a frown.

In the Allison Peers volume, *St Teresa of Jesus and other Essays and Addresses*, the other essays are by no means negligible. To begin with: the historical problem of Spanish Mysticism. Professor Peers asks the question: how account for the mystical eruption in the second half of the sixteenth century in Spain? He laboriously puts aside a number of partial answers. His own is suitably nuancé. Perhaps he fails to emphasise sufficiently the general spiritual renaissance even before the Reformation burst, in the case of Spain, beginning with the Franciscans and Benedictines and Dominicans. Secondly there seems to be continual confusion between mystical literature and mysticism in itself. The latter can thrive, and maybe better, without the literature. Undoubtedly it was thriving long before the literary outburst occurred.

The most valuable section of Professor Peers's book will be the chapters 'New Light on Saint John of the Cross'. Herein he has utilised two recent major contributions to scholarship on St John, the volume entitled *Poesía Española* by Dámaso Lonso, which discusses the literary sources of a number of Saint John of the Cross's poems—with most surprising results—and secondly P. Crisógono de Jesús's *Vida y Obras de San Juan de la Cruz*, by far the best life of the saint ever written. It not only includes all the evidence from the fifth volume, *Procesos de Beatificación y Canonización* of the Saint, but shows signs of his having himself work over the original MSS. of those series of witnesses. It is instructive to compare the Professor's account of Saint John's escape from the prison in Toledo with that of Marcelle Auclair. We cannot expect the latter, in after all an aside to her main theme, to be so up to date, but Peers's account gives us

¹ *Saint Teresa of Jesus and Other Essays*. By E. Allison Peers. (Faber; 25s.). *Saint Teresa of Avila*. By Marcelle Auclair, with a preface by André Maurois. (Burns Oates; 30s.)

a really scholarly objective view, whereas hers could be improved. Peer's essays on Cervantes's influence outside Spain are interesting.

Finally, the last essay in the book pays tribute to one who graciously received any who visited him in the lovely Cartuja of Burgos, the Prior of Miraflores, Dom Edmund Gurdon. Whether he gave the place an intense feel of holiness, or whether Miraflores gave it to him, I do not know. But no one who went up those miles of road from the city and entered the gate is likely to forget the impression made, not on the surface but on one's inner being.

To return to Saint Teresa.

The essays by Peers are in his best manner, a little laboured perhaps but thorough. It was a pity that the one, on her letters, could not have been squeezed into the first volume of letters published last year. The third on her style is as dull as ditch water. How she would have chaffed the good professor for being so scholarly on that—she may be doing so now. Style?—why, she just wrote, and with that *joie de vie*, with such directness that you can hear her talking, persuading, laughing and scolding and coaxing all the time.

The Life by Marcelle Auclair is a delight. A great advantage it has over so many other lives is its being written by a woman. Men make such heavy weather of Saint Teresa even when—perhaps specially when—they admire her very much. St Teresa spent her time coaxing men to do what she wanted against their earthly judgments; the skill of it can probably only be portrayed by another skilful practitioner. I doubt if the character of the Mother Foundress has been better analysed than here.

But that is not the main business of the book. The interest for us poor mortals is, as in all success stories, how was it done? How did she become a saint? I must confess that a saint at the height of his powers rather exhausts me, just as a too accomplished talker does. We want to see the process of sanctification. The B.O.W. blurb says: 'A saint she indeed became, by force of will'. A little startling; one thought that grace did it. And in the context of the preface the sentence runs no more correctly. But that was only M. André Maurois. Saint Teresa and her biographer know better. The very first move was Teresa's understanding that 'what was wrong was that I failed to put my whole trust in His Majesty and did not divest myself of my own self-confidence'.

Nevertheless, the decisiveness of the woman who decided to be a saint did play its part. M. Maurois has certainly hit on one of the elements in the drama. We know what to do and do not put our will to it; so God's grace is as it were wasted. She knew what was to be done, and to know, for her, was to do. And God's grace was not wasted.

It is noteworthy that for seven years Teresa lived the life of a mediocre nun, for ten more she struggled, with God's grace, to reach sanctity. She

did not say she would not try at perfection. She positively aimed at it. She wrote a little book for her young nuns in San José at Avila called the Way of Perfection. Of course we are all meant for sanctity; she knew it, and so took the necessary steps. This book admirably diagnoses the processes of her purification.

One of the enigmas of the life of Saint Teresa is her relationship with Saint John of the Cross. At first sight we might say there is no mystery. But after she met Gracián, it is to him that she turns and not to Saint John. True, that every time she mentions him, she calls him a saint; yet, as the author remarks, 'They were made both to understand and not to understand each other.' Saint John was nervous of contact with the world, nervous of friendship. Saint Teresa took all these things in her stride. He was distressed by her repeated raptures; she tried to hide them, but she took all that the good God gave her. However, to say as the author does that Saint John is a tortured mind is completely to misunderstand this serene and seraphic saint. Saint John was too rational to make allowances for the femininity of his friend's form of holiness. I venture to guess that Saint John was the only man Saint Teresa found she could not boss. She did not try. He refused to be fussed like P. Gracián, refused to be coaxed. He did the unpardonable thing of destroying her letters to him. He loved them too much. That gives us some inkling of the depth of his veneration for her.

In this biography there is insight into character, noble writing, exciting writing; there is a story to tell and it gets told with gusto. That lovely city of Avila lives in one's imagination again, that perfect Christian medieval city, the city of the saints with its mighty walls, its fortress cathedral, the sleeping Dominican friary of Santo Thomas in the valley below, and not far away the convent of the Incarnation. Segovia, too, with its cool cathedral dominated by its lofty tower, from which one looked down onto the patio of one of Teresa's convents. Spain, the land of heroes and of saints, lives again in these pages, with its fierce winter winds and its fiercer summer heat. It has not changed, and there will be saints travelling its roads and praying in its quiet cloister at this very hour, and to the crack of doom, so please su Majestad. . . .

STUDIES IN SANCTITY. By Sheila Kaye-Smith. (Cassell; 15s.)

The first impression produced by these studies of four holy people—three canonised: St Catherine of Genoa, St Rose of Lima, St Teresa of Lisieux; one uncanonised: Mother Cornelia Connelly—is that of ground already well worked over which has borne by now most of the hagiographical fruit it is likely to give us. First impressions are wrong in this case, as so often, for Miss Kaye-Smith has brought new methods to bear and from these studies we can obtain fresh light on a number of problems