

Blackfriars

DICKENS. By Osbert Sitwell. (Chatto & Windus; 2/-.)

Lytton Strachey in one of his essays discusses the best conditions and places in which different authors may be most appropriately read. Pope is at his best in a formal garden, Herrick in an orchard, Shelley in a boat at sea, Sir Thomas Browne floating down the Euphrates or along the shores of Arabia. And where would you go to read your Dickens? Go where you will: he needs no setting or atmosphere, as Osbert Sitwell proved by reading him amid the stupendous towers and flashing lights of New York. Read him in no matter what remote city or distant foreign field: he is for ever England. He is as English as Chaucer or Shakespeare, not only in the way he reflects the English character, but in this that he is massive and great with the special kind of greatness which only England could produce. Dickens, as Mr. Sitwell reminds us, has a hold upon a large public not usually given to reading. He attracts for different reasons; first he is thrilling and sensational (blended with melodrama and large doses of sentiment); secondly he went in for practical social reform, 'humanitarian achievement,' as they call it (but better described as charity, joy, etc., the Beatitudes, the Good Samaritan, and in fact the whole catalogue of the supernatural and Christian virtues); and thirdly there is his humour—the nearest thing in human nature to the grace of God. There will always be, it is to be hoped, English readers enough to feel the force of one or other or all of these appeals; otherwise we may despair of England.

Be it said that this reviewer opened this book with misgivings, unallayed by the superlative praise on the book's jacket. But reassurance soon came. Mr. Sitwell is not a Dickens idolator, nor is he the type of modern who would decry Dickens as a mere vulgar demagogue or a stale Victorian comedian. Indeed, it is the 'modernity' of Dickens that Mr. Sitwell goes out of his way to extol: he shows him to have been the source of inspiration for Proust, and declares he was a writer a hundred years ahead of his time. Mr. Sitwell provides one more testimony from an unexpected quarter to Dickens's universality and perennial humanity, a further confirmation of the belief that Dickens is above fad and fashion, not the cult or craze of an hour, but permanently among the immortals.

B.

WHAT WE LIVE BY. By Ernest Dimnet. (Jonathan Cape; 6/-.)

Canon Dimnet has an engaging manner. Come, my dear friend, he seems to say, come and sit down and let us talk

about the most entrancing thing on earth. In the simplicity of your innocent heart you ask, What is the most entrancing thing on earth? *You*, my friend, *you*, he says. And you find yourself saying, Of course! Of all interesting things I am the most utterly entrancing—to myself. The Canon's smile becomes almost audible through the printed page: he treats you to a kind of kind irony: he puts bright remarks into your mouth and then tells you how sparkling they are. 'Nicely expressed.' 'Not at all badly put.' He keeps up a gently-flowing dialogue and convinces his reader of a brilliance hitherto unsuspected. He makes you argue and endows you with all the qualities of a scintillating debater. You begin to like him. He is not patronising you: he is not preaching or scolding or nagging. He is only drawing you out, or rather drawing things out of you—*teaching* you and achieving the supreme victory of the teacher, creating sympathy and confidence in his pupil. He lives up to his own dictum, 'in art what we like is what teaches us.'

The matter of the book is all of a piece with the author's enchanting manner. The work is divided under the three main headings—the true, the beautiful and the good, and the transposed order of the last two is important, because it is the author's plea that Bonum is beauty in life, the supreme beauty the beauty of holiness; the highest art is our mysterious collaborating with God in the work of making perfect the soul which God has created. Canon Dimnet has the gift of presenting the Christian and Catholic philosophy of this world and the next in a style and idiom which will win the attention of our modern young men and women. He deliberately avoids both the name and the method known as apologetic just as he disapproves of a certain kind of 'philosopher's philosophy' which may so easily be strangled by technicalities and deprived of life. He hates the pompous and the recondite; he disavows any desire to give us a spiritual book, and yet here we have theology, philosophy, and 'spirituality,' presented attractively in a form we can manage and assimilate. The Canon writes English elegantly and his style is all the more readable and fascinating for the slightly foreign accent. The book is really what it tries to be—'a manual of happy living, a text-book to the art of being happy.'

B.D.

THE WAYS OF CHRISTIAN LIFE: OLD SPIRITUALITY FOR MODERN MEN. By Dom Cuthbert Butler, O.S.B. (London: Sheed & Ward; 1932. Pp. 256. 7/6 net.)

There has long been need for such a book as this. The Ways of Christian Life of course are really only one Way. Lay men