

LOUVAIN AND THE AMERICAN GIFT

LAST September I had occasion to refer, in an Irish paper, to certain impressions a recent stay in Belgium had left in my memory. At that time Belgians were particularly interested in the so-called Louvain Controversy, which centred round a Latin inscription that the American architect of the New Library in Louvain, with singular lack of restraint, desired to impose on the building to the confusion of all wicked Germans and to the greater glory of all good Americans. The grandiloquent inscription was meant to crown his labours on this field of Flanders ten years after the close of the Great War. I noted some extraordinary features in the reactions of Belgian public opinion in this connection. The controversy, I had then reason to believe, was at an end. I was mistaken. According to the latest information from Belgium, the inglorious struggle has been renewed, to the disgust, we may be sure, of all true lovers of culture, not only in Belgium, but in America and the world over. One would like to know more of the reactions of public opinion in America on the issue that has quite recently been the subject of legal proceedings in Louvain, which have resulted in the American plaintiff being non-suited. But to come back to my own impressions of Belgium last year.

How Belgium has changed with the times. What, no doubt, will especially strike the traveller, who has known Flanders before the War, will be the rapid transformation that has taken place, not merely in the face of the country but in the very mind and spirit of the people. True, Bruges remains unchanged. Under the shadow of her belfry, lulled with sounds of sweetest melody, dreaming only of the past and heedless of the future, she slumbers to-day as peacefully as ever. On

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all sides, however, the traveller will note the signs of the times—the almost complete triumph of the new over the old, of the modern spirit of crude materialism over the refined idealism that throughout centuries of rich achievement has inspired Flemish art and letters, and that still finds sanctuary—alas, none too sure, as we may see—within what remains of Old Louvain. During a recent visit to the Sedes Sapientiae, the congenial home as much of modern research as of grateful science, I was made painfully aware of the extent to which even that centre of culture had become affected by ultra-modern influences. In the past, Louvain has had to undergo many a sore trial at the hands of the enemy. How difficult soever these trials, she overcame them. Louvain is now passing through a very different experience, and her difficulties are all the greater that she has to endure them at the hands of friends. Within her academic groves may be discerned a portent from over the seas, a spirit that will not be denied, perturbed, restless, assertive, strangely out of keeping with her fine traditions. The following notes on one of the latest ‘materialisations’ of this domineering spirit may help the reader to get a clear idea of the difficulties to which I have referred. Some of the facts I emphasise will, no doubt, be common knowledge to many readers. They will, however, bear brief recapitulation here.

On the 8th of August of last year a banquet was held in Brussels, the guest of honour being an American, Mr. Whitney Warren, who had been selected by the University of Louvain as the architect of the New Library—a very fine creation in the Brabant style of the 17th century—that now replaces on another site in Louvain the famous Old Library, so wantonly destroyed by the Germans in August, 1914. America, *i.e.* the United States, had undertaken to provide the actual building, and France the decorations. In point

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of fact the monument as it now stands—it was begun in August, 1921, and some of the halls were solemnly inaugurated two years later—is much more than a Franco-American collaboration. Most certainly is it incorrect to attribute the restoration of the Louvain Library to the very exclusive generosity that the Old and New Worlds are now being asked to admire. But of this anon . . . For all practical purposes the architect's labour of seven years was at an end. At the last moment, however, a hitch had occurred. A serious difference of opinion had arisen between Mr. Warren and Mgr. Ladeuze, the Rector Magnificus of the University, over a certain inscription, which, the former insisted, should stand out prominently on a balustrade that was to surmount the imposing front of the Library, in letters six feet high, arresting the attention of all observers. The inscription in Latin ran: *Furore Teutonico Diruta Dono Americano Restituta*, meaning in plain American: *Destroyed, by German Fury; Restored by American Donation*.

Here was neither the place nor the time for a very natural timidity on the part of the Rector. It is not difficult to understand, and sympathise with, the mingled emotions that must have gripped Mgr. Ladeuze as he politely yet firmly refused his assent to the architect's proposal. Burning with a resentment that, fortunately, however, for posterity, had nothing in common with the vindictiveness of the German Fury whose fire he had so genially stolen, Mr. Warren, taking the public into his confidence, vehemently protested against the Rector's action in wresting from his, the architect's hand, the crown of achievement just as his work was completed: the inscription, he claimed, was the very fountain and source of his architectural inspiration, the inseparable essence of his creation, and should dominate the building as the central theme of the whole construction. His indignation was ex-

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pressed in no uncertain terms and given the widest publicity, especially in the anti-clerical Press. Was patriotism dead in Belgium? Were Belgians now so ready to forget? Surely not. Perish the thought: ingratitude thy name is Belgium.

Some idea of the real significance of this banquet and of the organisation behind it may be gathered from the following editorial note, which appeared in the *Indépendance Belge* (Thursday, July 26, 1928), the leading organ of Liberalism in Belgium and the enthusiastic champion of the architect's cause against Mgr. Ladeuze. I translate almost literally:

'The W. Warren Manifestation. At a banquet to be held in Brussels on the 8th of August, Mr. W. Warren will be presented with a Book of Gold bearing the signatures of all Belgian patriots desirous of testifying their admiration for him. All those desirous of seeing their names figure in the Book of Gold are requested to forward a simple post card bearing their name, fore-names, address and signature to: 33 rue Juste Lipse, Louvain. Those wishing to take part in the banquet are requested to forward at the very earliest opportunity the sum of 155 francs to the *Postal Cheque Account 890.61, Maître Calloud, Avocat, Louvain.* At the banquet subscribers will receive an artistic bronze medallion. As the date of the manifestation is very imminent, those desirous of being associated with it should communicate at the very earliest opportunity.'

The reader will notice the simplicity of the means by which 'adhesions' can be canvassed for such objects in Belgium.

The manifestation as such was a great success. To some features of it I must refer more particularly, even at the risk of wearying the reader's patience. Earlier in the day Mr. Warren, on receiving the honorary diploma of the Royal Belgian Society of Architects, took the occasion to eulogise warmly the unforgettable rôle played by Belgium in the Great War. At the banquet itself impassioned protests were raised against the

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pro-German, anti-Belgian attitude assumed by the 'intellectuals' of Louvain. In refusing to satisfy the legitimate demands of Mr. Warren in the matter of the inscription, Mgr. Ladeuze was not merely doing a serious injury to the architect's reputation. He was at the same time slandering the revered Cardinal Mercier. He was deliberately frustrating the dead Cardinal's intention. At this critical moment Mr. Warren was interpreting the conscience of Belgium, her wounded national feelings and her dignity. Belgian patriots could never forget the noble zeal, the uncompromising spirit displayed by Mr. Warren in taking to heart their susceptibilities and championing their rights. Whatever might happen his inscription: *Furore Teutonico Diruta Dono Americano Restituta* would remain indelibly graven on Belgian hearts. Responding to the immense ovation with which he was greeted by many more than Belgian patriots, the architect expressed his deep-felt gratitude for a nation's sympathy in his hour of bitter trial. He was leaving Belgium. When the hour of justice struck, then only would he return. Meanwhile he was leaving behind a sacred trust. In the hands of Belgian patriots his cause, he felt sure, was in safe keeping. He was not, however, leaving the Belgian soil empty-handed. He was taking with him something of Belgium, some of her heart and soul. Come what might, he would toil to the very last for the fulfilment and realisation of the great Cardinal's intention.

So ran the friendly Press reports of the manifestation, a manifestation by no means confined to anti-clerical elements—Catholic sentiment in Belgium is still very much divided over *l'Affaire Whitney Warren*. Nothing had occurred to mar the harmony of the proceedings. In this atmosphere of mutual esteem and good will no jarring note had been sounded. Not one single Belgian patriot there seems to have been

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able to escape for a moment from Mr. Warren's magnetic fascination and enjoy a hearty laugh at his expense. It was already common knowledge that the architect had instituted legal proceedings against the University of Louvain, claiming 2,000,000 francs from its sorely depleted treasury for personal damages, moral and material, suffered at the hands of the Rector, Mgr. Ladeuze, and that he was seeking for an injunction of the Court to compel the University to set up immediately in accordance with his plan the *Furore Teutonico* inscription under a penalty of 5,000 francs for every's day's delay in executing the decree. Here was stuff for the cynic. Cynics, however, were conspicuously absent at this feast, which passed off without untoward incident.

Whatever might happen, an orator had declared at the banquet, the *Furore Teutonico* inscription would remain indelibly engraved on Belgian hearts. The reader, no doubt, would like to know more of an inscription that can inspire such enthusiasm. Here, Mr. Warren assures us, is the inspiration that fired his creative genius in Louvain when he constructed what all critics recognise to be a magnificent piece of architecture. It is difficult, however, to trace much in common between this dream of harmonious beauty to which the architect has given life and the flaunting grandiloquence of the words which ascribe solely to American generosity the restoration of the Library 'destroyed by German Fury.' The questionable Latinity¹ of the inscription has been the theme of endless discussions among philologists and lovers of good scholarship. This, however, need not concern us here. More to the point for us is the questionable taste of the legend itself. How Germans must smile

¹ e.g. the ambiguity of the adjective *Teutonicus*, which is as applicable to the Flemish and the Dutch as to the so-called German.

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at this reminder of the past! And Belgians faced by this crude appeal to their sentiments of gratitude—what must be their real feelings?

The New Library, Mr. Warren had said, was meant to commemorate the crime committed in Louvain against Culture. To commemorate a crime! There are surely higher and nobler themes, one would think, to offer for the edification of Culture's votaries than the mere crime committed by Kultur against Culture. Was there not something more inspiring to be found in the triumph of Culture over Kultur, in the release of Culture from the grip of Kultur? However that may be, the architect drew up his plans under the inspiration of the 'symbolic theme' handed over to him, as he says, by Cardinal Mercier himself: *Furore Teutonico Diruta Dono Americano Restituta*. These plans were duly approved and passed, and now the architect claimed protection for his own artistic rights of property in them, not forgetting the chief thing, the 'symbolic theme.' That symbol was the master-thought, the key-note, the dominant *motif* of the whole architectural composition. To suppress the inscription now would be to deprive the monument of its essential character and significance. The architect based his claim on the international conventions safeguarding such rights, in so far as they affect the reputation of artists. . . . Here we must cry a halt to these protestations. We can understand and admire the symbolism of Culture's triumph over Kultur, of the release of Culture from the grip of infuriated Kultur. But can we be really and truly edified, as no doubt Mr. Warren quite genuinely feels we ought to be, by a symbolic theme that 'features' anything but the triumph or release of Culture, much less admiration for noble self-effacement? Personally I fail to see anything particularly inspiring in the theme here displayed for our admiration. How much finer is the

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inspiration we get from the inscription on the pedestal of the Nemesis, a marble replica of the original presented by Greece to the Library: 'Here a crime was committed against human thought: the world has wiped it out.' A Greek gift with a happy omen indeed!

I have pointed out how difficult it is for the beholder to reconcile the beauty of Mr. Warren's genial creation with the paltry inspiration of his inscription. As a maker of words Mr. Warren is not in his element. As a builder he excels. Like good music, his architectural composition needs no words to enhance its beauty, and least of all this inscription, with its strident appeal to the most modest of all sentiments—gratitude. That appeal, one cannot help feeling, should not be the key-note here. If recorded it must be, it should be relegated to the category of inscriptions, less challenging but no less purposeful, that actually cover the lower part of the façade and side walls, forming, it may be added, a fairly comprehensive directory of scholastic institutions all over the United States, which have contributed to the American donation. That here is the proper place for it, Mr. Warren will in time be bound to recognise.

As we know, his fellow-countrymen have not been slow to voice their protest against his attitude of 'no compromise.' Belgian public opinion, as served by its Press, has not been so outspoken, which in this case is quite comprehensible. So far the Belgian Press has given but the very slightest attention to such a critical attitude. On the contrary the expressions of opinion from that quarter reveal a widespread admiration for the architect and for his transparently genuine zeal as guardian and curator of that sacred trust—the Cardinal's intention.

The Cardinal's intention! Well then, what about it? the reader will ask. We must get Mr. Warren to enlighten us on the matter. He asserted that the in-

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scription : *Furore Teutonico Diruta Dono Americano Restituta*, written in pencil on a slip of paper, was handed over to him directly ('from hand to hand') by the late Cardinal Mercier in 1921 before the foundation stone of the Library was laid, as the symbolic theme for the 'intellectual and sentimental conception' of his work. So far so good. Mr. Warren, it appears, still has possession of this piece of paper. For him it recorded the dead Cardinal's express intention, and he would never swerve from his fixed determination to give that intention its due fulfilment. Well—the really important matter here is that slip of paper. We may expect to see the Cardinal's own handwriting. But here comes the first surprise. In a reproduction of the original script taken from a photographic copy that Mr. Warren allowed to be published we read :

FURORE
TEUTONICA
DIRUTA
DONO
AMERICANO
RESTITUTA

At last we know where we are. This is no handwriting in the colloquial sense of the term. It is merely a copy of printed capital letters revealing no particular authorship. Now comes surprise number two: *Teutonica* in the second line should be *Teutonico*. That the hand or brain of Cardinal Mercier was in any way responsible for this glaring lapse, this gross solecism, is incredible on any hypothesis. The French word *furieur* may be feminine, but the Latin *furor* is masculine and requires its adjectival qualification to be of the same gender. Mr. Warren seems at first to have attached but little significance to this grammatical discrepancy. He said it could not matter

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who penned, or rather pencilled, the letters in question. In any case the intention was clear, and the Cardinal's *imprimatur* could not be disproved.

Mr. Warren has at length realised, we hope, the futility of his campaign for the erection of the *Furore Teutonico* inscription. As an architect he has ventured most unfortunately beyond his natural element. In the heat of the fray he allowed himself to be influenced by considerations foreign to the spirit of the noble monument he has left behind in Louvain. In that monument he has now wiped out more than one sin.

The most extraordinary feature, however, of the whole controversy, now, let us hope, a thing of the past, has been the indiscriminating zeal displayed by such representative organs of cultured opinion in Belgium as the *Indépendance Belge* in supporting Mr. Warren's contentions and claims. The anti-clericalism of that organ is sufficiently evident and may partly explain its attitude in the dispute between Mgr. Ladeuze and the architect. On the other hand, the architect's cause was vigorously supported by the Catholic Flemish Press, which perhaps could not help entertaining a certain dislike for Mgr. Ladeuze as a representative in high office of the French opposition to the *Flamingant* Movement. The philosophic indifference of the *Indépendance Belge* to the religious concerns, dear to the heart of the very Catholic Fleming, did not, however, cut it off from communion with the latter in one and the same devotion: both parties prayed hard for the Cardinal's intention.

The Cardinal, God rest his soul, what had he to say, one wonders, about the sincerity of that devotion?

VALENTINE O'HARA.