

THE FIRST DECADENT. By James Laver. (Faber and Faber; 25s.)

Huysmans, who died forty-seven years ago, never suffered the complete decline and extinction usual with authors immediately after their death. Anatole France's fall in popularity was sudden and he has never yet recovered lost ground. But Huysmans' books continued to be reprinted and sold in moderate quantities during all the years since his death. And moreover his *A Rebours* is an essential work for the understanding of the French Symbolist Movement. It is also the work which influenced Oscar Wilde when he was writing his *Picture of Dorian Gray*. Given the interest that the English usually have in eccentrics, it is strange that this is the first full-length biography of Huysmans to appear in English.

Mr Laver's biography is vividly written and it gives a colourful picture of the last years of the nineteenth century; it is beautifully produced and profusely illustrated. It will not however be the definitive book on Huysmans, as he has not seen the most recent research and discoveries. There is far more material available, both published and unpublished, than Mr Laver realizes. Mr Laver uses the novels of Huysmans as biographical material, but this is not always reliable as a method, for it does not give sufficient importance to artistic creation, though it is probably more helpful in Huysmans' case than in others, for his work tended to be autobiographical. Nevertheless it is difficult to see in des Esseintes, the hero of his most famous novel, *A Rebours*, a portrait of the author himself, nor can it ever have been intended that one should.

The book tends to be digressive, so that one loses sight of the main subject while enjoying these varied *hors d'oeuvre*. These details do however serve to build up the total picture of the period.

Mr Laver's English style is peppered with French words which add nothing to the general atmosphere as they have perfectly adequate English equivalents. Also it is doubtful whether the average English reader will guess what an 'accessit' is. Mallarmé is described as a 'professor in a college'. The French use the word 'professor' much more freely than do the English, and it only means for them a teacher, while a 'collège' is merely a school. Mallarmé was far from being a college professor, for he was only a teacher of English in a school, who was very adversely reported on by his inspectors.

Mr Laver declares that Huysmans was almost the inventor of 'Art for Art's Sake'. This is not really correct, for it had been practised for nearly half a century when he began writing. Gautier had better claims to be its progenitor, when he wrote the Preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Mapuin* which was published in 1836.

The usefulness of this book to students and scholars is impaired by the

**absence** of a preface in which the problems could be set forth, and of a conclusion to summarize what has been achieved. The Index contains no mention of the works of Huysmans or of the other authors referred to, so that they are hard to find. There is however an excellent bibliography of works dealing with him.

The biography makes very pleasant reading and throws much light on a period of French literature which has always been popular with English readers. The portrait is built up with literary skill, and it is hoped that it will bring people to the novels of Huysmans themselves.

ENID STARKIE

### NOTICES

THE *Everyman* edition of Gibbon's DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE (Dent; six volumes, 7s. each) has a new introduction specially written by Mr Christopher Dawson. Sympathy with Gibbon as an ecclesiastical historian was scarcely to be expected from Mr Dawson, but his judgment of the work as a whole is curiously severe. For him it is a real problem to know why Gibbon retains a pre-eminent position, and the answer he suggests is that it is because of the author's complete identification of himself and his great theme, the City and Empire of Rome.

THE CATHOLIC WAY, by Theodore Maynard (Staples Press; 15s.) is not simply another digest of doctrine, but describes the way Catholic lay people live. It is written both for them and for those still outside the Church by a distinguished convert who has already published many books on Catholic subjects. His present work covers the sacramental life, popular devotions, social and political activities.

TRINITY WHOM I ADORE, by Dom Eugene Vandeur, O.S.B., (Herder; 22s.), a series of meditations on the prayer of Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity, has been translated from the French by Dominican nuns. It is an excellent introduction to the spiritual message of Sister Elizabeth, for as the dust-cover says, 'the strongly Benedictine sense of liturgy and scripture guarantees the solidity of the thoughts contained in these chapters'.

LIFE IS WORTH LIVING, by Bishop Fulton Sheen (Peter Davies; 12s. 6d.), contains twenty-six of the famous T.V. talks which have made their author one of the best-known figures in America today. He has always something helpful to say, whether he is discussing the difficulties of individuals or world-wide political problems, and his pithy style ensures that his message will be heard.