

REVIEWS

THE WHITE CANONS IN ENGLAND. By H. M. Colvin. (Clarendon Press, Oxford. 1951; 35s.)

Although they have had to wait a long time the English Premonstratensian, or Norbertine, Canons have now through the industry of Mr Colvin an excellent history of their pre-Reformation activities, and a complete account of their ancient foundations which totalled thirty abbeys ranging from Newhouse in Lincolnshire, begun about 1143, to the last one established at Wendling in Norfolk in 1267.

In a preliminary chapter the author tells of the rise and development of the White Canons (as they came to be called to distinguish them from the Austin or Black Canons) and of their position in the hierarchy of religious orders. Like so many monastic bodies they grew rapidly from a very small group, making their originator a founder of a large order almost despite himself. Certainly St Norbert when he gathered a handful of disciples round him at Prémontré can have had no idea of what would come of his action in so few years. Yet thirty years after he established his first modest little settlements there were more than a hundred houses in existence. The saint had originally planned a small body to help him in preaching and other missionary activities, but when that failed he settled with his followers at Prémontré to live a canonical but very ascetic life. This was in 1121, but five years later he was made archbishop of Magdeburg and amongst the houses he founded in his German diocese he inculcated his own missionary zeal, whereas the ascetes he had left behind, after some hesitation as to whether they should continue together or break up entirely, decided to carry on at Prémontré as a regular monastic community with an abbot approved by Norbert. The missionary activity favoured by the saint disappeared from the order as a whole, and was confined to Germany. Eventually by the thirteenth century it had died out. But the Premonstratensians never completely severed themselves from the pastoral work for souls, retaining throughout their history down to the present day the possession of parishes dependent on an abbey and served by its members. In the first century of their existence they seem to have employed secular clerics to serve these dependent churches, but after the middle of their second century it became the common custom for the canons themselves to serve as parish priests and dispense entirely with vicars chosen from the secular clergy. That this was the case in England Mr Colvin clearly shows.

The bulk of his work is taken up with descriptions of the thirty abbeys and their possessions and dependencies, supported by excellent chapters on the organisation of the order in England, which in the late fifteenth

century still possessed close upon five hundred canons. At the time of the dissolution the last abbot of Barlings was William Mackerell, bishop of Chalcedon and auxiliary of Lincoln. He died on the scaffold in 1537, a victim of Tudor tyranny, for his complicity in the Pilgrimage of Grace. Probably like other sufferers he was offered his life if he repudiated papal supremacy. The author makes no point of this, but the reader's attention may be called to a valuable article in *Dominican Studies*, January 1949, where Father Anstruther, O.P., goes very carefully and fully into the question, and shows that at least one condemned Pilgrim, namely Dr John Pickering, priest of Lythe, received a royal pardon and was released for accepting the royal supremacy, whereas his fellows, including another John Pickering, a Dominican, all suffered the extreme penalty at Tyburn. What happened in London might well have happened to Bishop Mackerell in the north.

S.G.

THE REVELATIONS OF MECHTHILD OF MAGDEBURG. Translated by Lucy Menzies. (Longmans; 18s.)

The title of the collected works of Mechthild which were gathered together in the early fourteenth century and which are here translated almost in their entirety from the original MS., is *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. This is the theme of her revelations which might almost be given the same title as Mother Julian's since the flowing light is the love of God and this appears in the constant dialogues throughout the book; she writes of 'his touch of love and flow of desire'. These two hundred and sixty detached, though not disconnected, 'revelations' of varying length are of special significance because Mechthild lived throughout the thirteenth century, dying in 1297 just before the great wave of the fourteenth-century mysticism began. They represent a vivid liturgical and poetic mysticism closer in style to the writings of St Gertrude and St Hildegard and leading on to the great poets, in many ways reminding the reader of Dante as Miss Menzies points out. There is much here in the personification of the virtues to suggest the dramatisation of Langland, and the exuberance of Margery Kempe is not lacking. The Mass, the annual procession of saints through the liturgical year, the deep appreciation of the Blessed Sacrament, the horrifying picture of the devil, are all here to show us what the thirteenth century could do for a true mystic. Miss Menzies' occasional notes link these revelations here and there with the Pseudo-Denis and Eckhart; but this would seem to be a strained relationship. Mechthild is not really at home in the 'other-worldly' atmosphere of the neo-platonic spirituality. 'Contemplation' suggests to her that she may be aspiring to be an angel, but she reacts firmly in favour of remaining a human being: 'I take Him in my hand, eat Him and drink Him and do with Him what