

Book Review

LIKE BLACK SWANS: Some people and Themes, by Brocard Sewell

Tabb House. £11.95

Not least amongst the pleasures of this latest book by Father Brocard Sewell is the erudite and, where necessary, candid manner of writing. His essay on Henry Williamson is only one of several on people he knew personally, alongside others who were more distant in time but engaged his interest. The fact that all but two at some time, if not throughout life, were of the Catholic faith may not be purely fortuitous, but they are generally and ultimately linked in quite another way.

The link, as Mr Colin Wilson notes in his Introduction, is "centred around the problem of black swans in a society that insists that all swans must be white", in other words, the articulate and active, 'the contraries' of society who swim against or aslant the current of their time. Such people seldom enjoy a wide or popular acclaim in life, and only rarely does posterity regenerate their name. Yet the purpose here is by no means solely to 'promote' neglected genius of an offbeat kind in fields as various as religion, poetry, acting, crusading, printing and, of course, writing - all subjects of interest to Father Sewell - but to consider their characters, with which he clearly has sympathy and affinity. Indeed, in some cases, this exposition redresses the balance in otherwise not very attractive characters.

Writing on Henry Williamson, he discusses the major pre-occupation of his post 1918 life: the futility of war, and his personal efforts through word and deed to avert its repetition. The results, in so far as his general reputation is concerned, were all but disastrous. Some, for example, have seen in Williamson's enthusiasm for a return to the land - an essential part of any national regeneration - merely an attempt to escape from other problems, a view that I do not believe is by any means accurate. But, in any case, as Father Sewell points out, he was only one of very many who felt exactly the same, who lacked the articulation to express themselves. The 'return to the land' theme was nothing new. The Distributist League, we are reminded, was in existence before the Great War, and urged, among other aims, a redistribution of land into small family-run units that would support the country as well as the family. Well known supporters of the League included Belloc and Chesterton. The latter's optimistic embrace of the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas is contrasted nicely in another essay with the pessimistic atheism of Hardy.

**Reviewer's note: 'The Contraries' was the Red Indian name for those white settlers of pioneer days who carried on regardless of all vicissitudes, and who would not be diverted from the goal they had set out to achieve, even in the face of death.*

Another subject, the crusading Dominican priest Vincent McNabb, strongly championed Distributist policies, and so did H.D.C. (Hilary) Pepler who, with Eric Gill, founded the Guild of SS Joseph and Dominic at Ditchling (still surviving today), a kind of association of craftsmen who shared a common philosophy of 'small is beautiful', but whose individual activities were strictly self-supporting. This was another Distributist aim, based on the rejection of mechanised mass-production and what today we call multi-national companies.

Hilary Pepler, a man of many talents, founded the St Dominic's Press so that he might direct and control the printing of those books he intended to publish. (Earlier he had founded the imprint of Hampshire House Workshops, Hammersmith.) It was with Pepler that Father Sewell learned the craft of printing, and he decribes with some affection the work done there, praising Pepler's high skill and flair for design, which placed the Press high on the list of private presses of the time.

We also read selections from the poetry of Olive Custance, a fin-de-siecle writer of some charm who married Lord Alfred (Bosie) Douglas, forever associated with the unpleasantness over Oscar Wilde; also of George Anne (a Registry error for Georgiana) Bellamy, celebrated on the 18th century stage, a woman who, through lifelong imprudence, was frequently undone.

A larger historical figure is Philip Howard, created a cardinal-priest by Pope Clement in recognition of his services to religion in general and to English Catholicism in particular. Sadly, Howard never wore the red hat in his own country, his title of 'Cardinal of Norfolk' thus being rather an empty one. Forced out of England before the restoration of 1660, he was well thought-of, and worked for the then exiled Charles II in Paris. After the restoration he was principal negotiator in the king's marriage to Katherine of Braganza, and rose from being her principal chaplain to the office of Queen's Grand Almoner, a position demanding the title of Bishop, under the Queen's Royal Marriage Settlement. But the king could not accept a Catholic bishop (a vicar apostolic of Rome and subject to its authority) in a Protestant country and, in any case, papal procrastination over the briefs authorising his consecration meant that they never reached England. So once again he sought exile in Europe, in 1673, and never saw England again. Despite these problems and others, it was Howard's efforts which included the restoration of the English Dominican province run from its foundation at Bornhem in Flanders, that helped English Catholicism survive at perhaps the worst time in its history.

A good deal, not generally known perhaps, is revealed in the essay on Hawker of Morgenstow, the Cornish parish he served faithfully and soundly in the English Church for 41 years. Father Sewell also argues well for that strange man, Frederick Rolfe, Baron Corvo, in maintaining that he was unfairly dismissed from the Scots College in Rome while studying for the priesthood, which he never subsequently achieved. Two 'themes' on present-day monastic life and Catholic spirituality (which might not always please Authority by their candour), and a memoir of Ann Quin, who died at the tragically early age of thirty-two, are also included in this fascinating and very readable book.

J.H.