

— BOOK REVIEW —

HELEN MacINNES, *While Still We Live* (Toronto: McClland & Stewart, 1944, 556 pp.)

To those who enjoyed the sustained tenseness of *Above Suspicion* and *Assignment in Brittany*, Helen MacInnes needs no introduction as the writer of probably the best spy stories to come out of the present war. The earlier books mingled a little judicious comment on National Socialism at work with the main element of suspense and excitement. *While Still We Live* contains its full quota of thrilling incident, but its chief interest lies in its unforgettable picture of a nation ground beneath the heel of German might, and still fighting back.

The title of Helen MacInnes's latest novel is the second line of the Polish national anthem, and its story is the story of Poland, and of that gallant nation's heroic and enduring fight against hopeless odds. This story is told through the adventures of Sheila Matthews, who was visiting with Polish friends at the outbreak of war. At first suspected by Polish authorities of being a Nazi spy, she poses as one after the fall of Warsaw in order to help the Polish underground secure information. Her true identity suspected by a member of the Gestapo, Sheila flees for safety to the headquarters of a guerilla band, and after much hardship and adventure arrives back in England.

For those interested in character, Helen MacInnes provides a full range. There is Madame Aleksander, who sees her family killed off one by one, and refuses the chance of escape from Poland to stay and nurse wounded guerilla soldiers. There is her brother, Edward Koryowski, an intellectual who dies by torture in a concentration camp rather than head a puppet government for the Nazis. There is Adam Wisniewski, an aristocrat turned guerilla leader, dubbed "fascist" by an unthinking American journalist, and now risking his life hourly in the fight for freedom. There is the shrewd and liberal-minded Olszak, a former newspaper editor who heads Warsaw's underground. And there are Jan

and Casimir and Kati and Zygmunt, Poland's "little people", who risk slow death to follow what leaders their country's two invaders have left them.

Besides filling her canvas with living characters, Miss MacInnes offers a full measure of thrilling episode. The life of a secret agent working for the Poles while pretending to work for the Germans would not be a particularly dull one, and Sheila Matthews is involved in enough deception, suspicion, and danger to keep the reader in a mild fever throughout the book.

More impressive, however, than either characters or plot is the picture of an unconquerable nation, the first to stand in arms against Hitler's threats pouring out its blood that freedom and honour might live in Europe. *While Still We Live* might almost have been written for those who will read a novel but will not trouble with a Polish White Paper, who are already forgetting the dangers of 1940 in the victories of 1944, who are preparing to welcome the usual German bid for sympathy because it will mean, temporarily, lower taxes and less trouble. It shows the coming of the Germans to Poland to bomb and burn and rape and torture, and drives home the lesson, which some have still to learn that the only relationship a German understands is that of master and slave, and that generosity in his vocabulary spells weakness. This story reminds us that when dealing with Germany vanquished we should not forget Germany victorious.

While Still We Live might also have been written for those journalists and their readers who are following the current party line given out from Moscow and vilifying as "fascist" the men who have led the unceasing Polish fight against fascism for more than five years. If Poland's reward for those years of endurance, suffering, and sacrifice is to be another partition, then the Atlantic Charter has become just a bad joke, and the next world war awaits only the sufficient development of the next period of power politics. Helen has done the cause of Poland, which is the cause of justice, a great service, and has produced a really gripping story in doing so.

H. L. JOHNSTON

BLANCHE MARY KELLY, *The Well of English*. (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers. 1936)

In the *Well of English*, Blanche Mary Kelly deals with the grandeur of English literature. In her own words, "English literature is unquestionably one of the greatest literatures of the world." This book is not intended as a history of English literature. The chief purpose of it is to show that this literature can be justly appraised only in the light of the Catholic faith. "Catholic Christianity infused into English literature a quality which accounts for most of what it has of greatness."

The well spring of this great literature, according to Miss Kelly, arises from the British Celts. They are really the beginners of that immortal subject of literary work, the Arthurian legend. From this rather insignificant source, all down through the ages even to its present day tributaries, there is a predominating Catholic note sounding out above all others in this immortal literature.

Although the Anglo-Saxon literature expresses much that is pagan in tone, nevertheless, it gives a more manifest expression of the "Christian interpolations of the references to God, the Almighty, the Creator of the world." The Anglo-Saxons emphasized, too, the position in the divine economy of the Blessed Virgin. "Anglo-Saxon literature is wholly religious in both subject matter and treatment, its masterpiece being, of course, the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*." (Bede)

There was no drama in Britain before the Norman conquest. The drama which developed after that time dealt with two themes. God and humanity. The miracle plays treated of the whole scheme of Redemption. Even in the drama of the Renaissance, in Tamburlaine, and Faustus, man's finiteness and his eternal consequence are stressed. All of Shakespeare's characters are Catholics. "His women are either wise or holy, with a beauty of countenance which reflects the beauty of their soul, or monstrous, if they are lovely but perverted." Miss Kelly insists that Shakespeare is predominantly Catholic, that he was influenced very little by the Renaissance as far as it was unCatholic. She admits, however, that specifically religious literature in the Elizabethan age was almost non-existent.

From the Elizabethan age down to Charles Dickens's time English literature is Catholic in tone. Dickens, however, came closer than any of his contemporaries to the humanity of the old religion by realizing the value of the soul, regardless of worldly position. In Tennyson's *In Memoriam* is an expression of a very Catholic outlook. Ruskin came closest to discovering the spiritual ills of the Victorian age. He referred the people to the religious health and sanity of the Middle Ages, as manifested in their literature.

Although the picture of English literature from the time of W. S. Lilly, 1885, to that of Aldous Huxley is a pagan one, yet, there is a Catholic side to it. This literature of "weakness, animalism, and self-pity" is at the same time literature of "spiritual aspiration." The literature of contemporary England is not only blazoned with man's "generic mark", but there is also a tendency in it to view human problems from an angle that at least approaches a Catholic standpoint.

In these modern days, Belloc and Chesterton undertook the assertion of Catholic principles. The essential difference between Belloc and Chesterton is shown in the differences in their biographies. The subjects of Belloc's biographies are chosen for their historical importance; those of Chesterton are chosen on the basis of spiritual relationship between himself and them.

Even though Miss Kelly did not intend her book as a history of English literature, I think it would serve the purpose admirably well. To all students of literature this book should be instructive and interesting. To Catholic students, especially, it should be a subject of deep study. However, it would seem that in her enthusiasm for English literature, Blanche Mary Kelly stresses to an unwarranted degree the Catholic note in this great literature. In Shakespeare, as well as in many other English authors, much is to be found that cannot be called Catholic.

TOMMY MacLELLAN, '46