

BOOK REVIEW

The Wine of Certitude: A Literary Biography of Ronald Knox. By David M. Rooney. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2009. 427 pp. \$17.95. ISBN 978-1-58617-232-9.

Ronald Knox was one of an extraordinary assemblage of gifted English Catholic writers gracing the first half of the twentieth century. He was an Anglican priest who converted to Catholicism, a brilliant prose stylist, a translator of the Bible into modern English, author of mystery stories, satires, apologetic works, hundreds of sermons and four published retreats, two for priests, two for laymen.

In *The Wine of Certitude*, David Rooney, a professor of engineering at Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY, but also a member of the American Catholic Historical Association and author of *Tar Heel Catholics, a History of Catholicism in North Carolina*, as well as several articles and many book reviews in Catholic periodicals, examines Knox's life from the point of view of the latter's prodigious literary output. In fact, approximately one-quarter of Rooney's book is composed of quotes from Knox's work.

Those more interested in this famous convert's life than in his writings may look to Evelyn Waugh's *Ronald Knox* or the more recent *The Knox Brothers* by Penelope Fitzgerald. The great merit of Rooney's book is that, after providing two chapters of straight biographical information, he moves on to spend more than three hundred pages summarizing each of Knox's works, commenting on their merits and what, if any, lasting significance they may have.

The chief disadvantage to this approach is that, unless one is a diehard Ronald Knox fan, fascinated by every word he ever put to paper, one has to wade through a great deal of material of limited interest and, by Rooney's own admission, of little permanent value. Few, e.g., will care very much that among Knox's first forays into publication were a series of novels, now badly dated, in a style utterly out of vogue. Similarly, Knox's satires and parodies, while showing off his wit and facility as a consummate writer of superb prose, will appeal to a very narrow audience at best. His detective fiction might fare better. Though not as well-known as Chesterton's Father Brown stories, Knox's mysteries were very popular in their day, bringing their author an income of 400 pounds per year in royalties, a handsome sum at the time. Rooney gives enough of each plot to tease his audience into seeking out the originals, if old fashioned mysteries are their cup of tea.

Almost certainly of more interest to most readers will be Knox's specifically religious books and Rooney's analysis of them, encompassing the entire last half of *The Wine of Certitude*. Rooney writes:

It is generally acknowledged that Ronald Knox was England's foremost expositor of the Catholic faith during the middle decades of the twentieth century, a time that was rich in noteworthy Catholic authors. What helped set him apart from some other equally brilliant writers and thinkers was that ... [e]veryone from the schoolgirl under the watchful eyes of the nuns to the skeptic disillusioned by the horrors of world wars and the fatuities of mass culture was being carefully considered as he wrote and spoke. (241)

Beginning in 1927 with *The Belief of Catholics*, Knox penned a series of brilliant apologetic and expository works on the Catholic faith. 1942 saw the publication of *In Soft Garments*, followed by *The Creed in Slow Motion* in 1949 and *The Hidden Stream* in 1953. In a wonderful chapter entitled "The Water of Conviction," Rooney quotes extensively from all of these, showing how remarkably fresh they remain in spite of more than half a century's having passed since their original publication. It is in this chapter, too, that Rooney explains the meaning of the evocative title of his book. Knox held that the apologist might bring someone to a reasoned conviction that the Catholic faith is true but that only the miracle of grace could change *the water of conviction into the wine of certitude* (245).

One of Knox's least financially successful books was written in response to the detonation of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Sensing that these horrific events marked an historic watershed, Knox wrote in *God and the Atom*:

Our age is in need of a great philosopher, one who can thread his way, step by step, through the intricate labyrinth of reasoning into which scientists have been led, eyes riveted to earth, by the desire to improve our human life, the desire to destroy life, or mere curiosity; one who can keep his mind, at the same time, open to the metaphysical implications of all he learns, and at last put the whole corpus of our knowledge together in one great synthesis.... He must be at once a Thomist and Atomist; until that reconciliation is attempted, the pulpit and the laboratory will be forever at cross purposes. (293)

Rooney responds: "Arguably, the required synthesizer, scientist and theologian, historian of science and philosopher of science, would enter the literary scene a generation later in the person of the polymath Benedictine priest Stanley Jaki" (293). Rooney recommends in particular three of Jaki's works: *The Road of Science and the Ways of God*, *The Relevance of Physics*, and *Science and Creation*.

An entire chapter of *The Wine of Certitude* is devoted to what is often considered Knox's masterpiece, *Enthusiasm*, a work that the late Monsignor Frank Glimm, former Church History Professor at this seminary, said should

become a life-long companion of every priest. It is a lengthy essay on the recurring tendency in the history of Christianity of certain groups to be led predominantly by emotional fervor and to interpret that fervor as a sure sign of the Holy Spirit's blessing and approval. *Enthusiasm* is measured and wise and, as Monsignor Glimm suggested, well worth the investment in time and effort it takes to read. Rooney concurs. We live in a time, he says, "when Knox's great admonitory historical work can serve as a check on imprudence and downright folly" (335).

The last two chapters of Rooney's book detail Knox's monumental translating of the Bible into modern English and his ongoing ministry as a preacher and retreat master. Frank Sheed was especially moved and instructed by *A Retreat for Laypeople* and *The Layman and His Conscience*, and many priests testify to how helpful they still find *A Retreat for Priests* and *The Priestly Life*. "There is a timeless appeal in these retreat talks," writes Rooney, "so carefully directed to the individual reader as well as the contemporary listener" (410). Of Knox's sermons, Father Philip Caraman, S.J. wrote that they were, "perhaps the most impressive body of pastoral teaching of our time. In scope and brilliance [they are] an achievement comparable only with Newman's Oxford Sermons, yet more valuable because the idiom and message belonged to our own generation" (Introduction to the *Pastoral and Occasional Sermons of Ronald Knox*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, p. 14).

Ronald Knox died on August 24, 1957. It would be a great shame if he were dismissed or ignored by contemporary Catholics simply because his life passed prior to the Second Vatican Council. David Rooney's book reminds us of the depth and breadth of Knox's learning and of his gifts as a teacher and preacher. It rewards the reader with a desire to sit at the feet of a master, there to be nourished with a wisdom and eloquence seldom surpassed in any age.

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