
All anthologies are bound to receive criticism for what has been omitted. That is inevitable. But what is unusually problematic about this anthology is what has been included rather than what has been excluded. The editors begin with their “Principles of Selection,” but these principles only explain the necessary criteria for selection: the texts must have been written by their authors while they were Catholics, must have appeared as far as possible in print rather than manuscript, in the English language as opposed to Latin, and by English as opposed to English-speaking writers. What the principles don’t explain is why these particular texts have been chosen. The nearest we get to an explanation from the editors is that they “have striven to keep a good balance in chronology and genre … and as far as possible between men and women, clergy and laity …” We are also told that the word “spirituality” is used in the widest sense to include “doctrines and devotions … Catholic philosophy, social thought, biography, history, and literature.” The implication seems to be that the anthology is intended to be comprehensive and representative as far as possible—rather than an anthology of the best Catholic writings. In the “General Introduction,” however, we are informed that the purpose of the book is to make accessible “the work of the masters of English Catholic writing.” Surely most readers of such an anthology would expect that the second of these two very different objectives would inform such an anthology, but in practice it seems to be the first objective that has guided the editors.

There is no question at all that this anthology reflects an extremely wide and impressive range of reading: this reviewer, for example, was surprised by the sheer amount of material from the eighteenth century. But as one reads through this very lengthy book, one wonders at the extraordinarily generous space given to writings that are certainly by no means the work of “the masters of English Catholic writing” and the correspondingly meagre space given to the undoubted “masters.” Newman, for example, is allotted less than fifteen pages, while the late Cardinal Hume, whose tiny output of conventional piety will certainly not outlive him, receives almost two full pages. John Bradburne, an extraordinary man but a very ordinary versifier (in spite of the ridiculous claim by the editors that he “is a poet to be named without embarrassment or exaggeration in the company of Hopkins and Thompson”), has no less than three and a half pages of his verse published in print for the first time.
David Jones, a minor poet, is flattered with over four pages of verse that the ordinary reader will find quite impenetrable, whereas Gerard Manley Hopkins is dismissed with a mere six pages. Ronald Knox may have said that his idea of Heaven would include a walk with the charismatic Jesuit Martin D’Arcy, but the six pages of the latter’s apologetics included here reveal the latter as far the inferior both in argument and style to the convert apologist whose writings have become minor classics of apologetics but who is allowed only eight and a half pages by contrast. Eric Gill was a major sculptor but we could do without nearly a page and a half of his jejune aesthetics.

Apart from the writers chosen and the respective spaces given to them, there is also a problem about the actual texts chosen. Again, there seems to be a desire to be as comprehensive or representative as possible. This would presumably explain why Newman—like, Chesterton, another towering under-represented figure—is represented by such an odd collection of texts which may reflect the range of his writing but which is hardly representative of his genius, there being no less than four out of 21 extracts from his Meditations and Devotions and even one from his posthumously published Sermon Notes. But even that is disproportionate. As is the selection of no less than four extracts from an essay and a travel book by Graham Greene and only two from only one of his novels. Even less justifiably, Lady Georgiana Fullerton is known as one of the first Catholic novelists but instead of a representative extract from one of her novels we are given a poem and two extracts from her private retreat notes that are totally without any literary, devotional, or theological distinction. This can perhaps be accounted for by the rather “pious” humourless tone of the anthology, which, for instance, means that you will not find here any of Belloc’s outrageously triumphalist verse mocking his Protestant countrymen. Hopkins’s greatest poems, The Wreck of the Deutschland and the Terrible Sonnets, are represented by a single stanza, and by no means the best one, from the former.

Inevitably Part 3, covering the period from 1850 to 1999, is the richest of the parts, and in an anthology of the best in English Catholic writing would occupy a disproportionately larger space than it does here. Certainly there is a great deal of material in the two earlier parts that is of little or no merit or interest. Thus we are given no less than three pages of Sister Gertrude More’s conventional “Penitential Exercises”—whereas, astonishingly, her distinguished contemporary Dom Augustine Baker’s classic Sancta Sophia has to be content with three pages.

But to end this review on a positive note, there are some delightful texts that the editors’ erudition has saved for us. I especially enjoyed the tart comment