Lesley Higgins, ed.


It can—it will—take weeks to thoroughly read through every page of this book, including its nearly 1,600 footnotes, all printed in a small, clear but eye-straining font, many of which are mines of information and mini-essays in themselves. In addition, there is a thirty-five page chronology of events in Hopkins’s life, running as a double column with the events that unfolded in the nearly forty-five years of Hopkins’s life (1844–89). There is also the editor’s forty-five page introduction to the diaries, journals, and—lastly—the entries and notations which together cover what we have in the various notebooks which have survived, other journals having either been destroyed by Hopkins himself or simply lost to posterity, so that—voluminous as Volume III is—it might well have gone on for several hundred pages more, if we had those materials as well.

Expertly, Professor Higgins takes us through what has survived and tells us what she is able to surmise of the lost diaries and journals, explaining with lucidity and authority how the diaries and journals themselves changed over the years, from the highly confessional entries of Hopkins’s years as an Oxford undergraduate to the extensive entries Hopkins wrote dealing not with himself but with the world around him, a world sometimes gray and dull, but more often charged with awe and wonder as he looked carefully at everything from diamonds to dust, including the flora and fauna, the landscapes and seascapes, as well as the marvelous shape-shifting cloudscapes and river currents over and under him. Then too there are the multiple drafts of his early poems written while at Oxford, including many words, phrases and lines which Hopkins crossed out or revised.

Here he is on the eve of his twentieth birthday, July 1864, lines interspersed amid a bevy of sketches he has made of medieval columns and stone tracery, composing a preliminary draft of the opening lines of “New Readings,” a poem which owes a great deal to his reading of one of his favorite poets, the seventeenth-century Anglican priest, George Herbert. Here are Herbert’s lines from his 1633 poem *The Sacrifice*:

> Then on my head a crown of thorns I wear:
> For these are all the grapes *Sion* doth bear,
> Though I my vine planted and watred there:
Was ever grief like mine?
And here is Hopkins:

Altho’ God’s word has said
On thistles that men look not grapes to gather,
I read the story rather
How soldiers matted thistles round His head
Where fruit of precious wine was shortly sped.

These lines Hopkins will shortly revise, in a version which survives in a manuscript copied out by his Oxford schoolmate, V.S. Coles, and which read:

Although the letter said
On thistles that men look not grapes to gather,
I read the story rather
How soldiers platting thorns around CHRIST’S Head
Grapes grew and drops of wine were shed.


Multiply that one example several hundredfold, and you have a sense of how young Hopkins spent his time filling his early diaries.

Volume III makes a fascinating counterpoint to Volume IV (also edited by Higgins and the first of the eight volumes of the new Collected Hopkins to be published by Oxford University Press a decade ago), which by stark contrast gives us Hopkins the Oxford undergraduate at his most polished and assured. By contrast, the present volume reads like a minestrone or some thick alphabet soup where the eye darts from one topic to the next without transitions, as if trying to make sense of some massive Cubist text which we have been given to discover what order we can. The bulk of the materials printed here belong to the years 1862 (a mere fragment, since the diary for that year Hopkins himself destroyed, perhaps as telling too much) through early 1875, that is, from the time Hopkins was still at Highgate, through his years at Oxford, through the period immediately following his conversion to Roman Catholicism and his graduation from Oxford, to his teaching prep school students at Newman’s Oratory in Birmingham, through his summer vacation hiking the Swiss Alps, followed by passages covering the first six and a half years of his life as a Jesuit, first as a novice, then as a scholastic and student of philosophy, followed by his first months of theology at St. Beuno’s in Wales.