

REVIEWS

Thunder Over Scotland : The Life of George Wishart

by James William Baird

Handsel Press £4.50

An American Presbyterian minister of Scottish ancestry “spent five years literally walking in the footsteps” of Wishart, and produced a 200-page account which “though fictionalized is based on all the historical material we could find.” Dr Baird presses into service his considerable powers of imagination, and has succeeded creditably in his aim to let Wishart live again. The Reformer to whom John Knox owed so much has been comparatively neglected by his fellow-countrymen. If they object to American dramatics, the remedy is clear. Admittedly, the cosy dialogue is at times irritating, but the essential facts about Wishart are accurately presented as we follow him from Montrose to Cambridge, Bristol, Zurich, Geneva, then back to England briefly, before returning to Scotland and the malign vengeance of Cardinal Beaton – first in the bottle dungeon in St Andrews Castle, and then at the stake in 1546. The Reformation was still fourteen years off, and one is humbled by the faithfulness of such as Patrick Hamilton and George Wishart, “watchmen of the night . . . who worked when all was gloom.”

Sometimes the author is mistaken or invites challenge. He has Knox aged forty in 1907, puts “mayor” where he means “provost,” promotes Hugh Latimer to being an “Excellency,” gets Scottish names slightly wrong, and perpetrates the appalling “Bobby Burns.” But these are minor things. Within the candidly-admitted limitations of his brief, Dr Baird has given us a timely reminder in this Christian Heritage Year of a young man whose testimony to the faith and whose contribution to the “uproar for religion” is still inadequately recognized.

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The Motherhood of God: A Report by a Study Group appointed by the Woman's Guild and the Panel on Doctrine on the invitation of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

Ed. by Alan E. Lewis.

The Saint Andrew Press. 71pp., £1.00.

The Group, whose report this is, was formed directly out of the use, by the President of the Guild, in public prayer, of the phrases “God our Mother” and “Dear Mother God”. The remit of the Group was to look at the theological implications of the concept of the Motherhood of God. They attempted to examine the desire of some, mainly women, to understand and speak of God in ways which reflect more fully the femine experience of life.

Let it be said at once that the Group insist that they conducted their study neither under pressure from secular feminism nor through an attraction to Mariolatry (which they decisively reject). The Report takes Scripture seriously and, because of that, cannot help stressing the Fatherhood of God in both Testaments and the understanding of God as Father stressed by the Incarnate Son. The members of the Group are careful to insist that this does not attribute

gender to God nor does it in any way encourage or teach male domination. They cannot avoid noticing that Scripture does identify in God other qualities or attributes which are “motherly” — His kindness, gentleness, tenderness. Does this entitle us, even occasionally, to address Him as “Mother God”? All of God cannot be contained within one image or metaphor and the Bible makes no attempt to do that. Should we content ourselves with thinking about God in the way the various metaphors encourage us or should we go one step further and actually address God in terms of some of these images?

A minority of the Group acknowledge the motherly qualities of God but feel bound by Scripture to address Him as Father. The majority of the Group, influenced by those who feel distanced from the Church by its exclusively male language for God, feel that there would be value in addressing God in these other ways. To back their conclusion they cite the motherly attributes of God revealed in Scripture and the examples within Mediaeval devotion.

While respecting the sincere convictions of all involved in the exercise behind this book, and appreciating the controversy which the appointment of the Study Group caused, it is difficult, however, for a non-Presbyterian not to dismiss it as trivial. Richer, more illuminating and rewarding studies on the doctrine of God exist elsewhere and, by comparison, this is lightweight. Nevertheless, if we learn from it that Almighty God is greater than the images provided by human language, then it may possibly justify the price if not the time and effort the Group spent on its preparation.

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