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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

MEDIÆVAL ROMANCE

AN unfamiliar object, or combination of objects, if perceived to be proximate, and to be invested with some magnitude, momentousness, or solemnity, is calculated to inspire a measure of uneasiness and dread. Relieve it of all that is of moment, and what is left need only pleasantly puzzle. But take away, instead, the proximateness or imminency and therewith all occasion on one's own personal part to harbour any awkward apprehension, and there now remains what may be designated a safe mystery. Let the entity in question derive its momentousness or solemnity from an association with religion, for us some form of Christian religion, and then contemplation of it may well commend itself pleasurable to one as a devout and meritorious exercise.

It is such a factor of agreeable quasi-mystery, of awesomeness (as distinct from sheer awe), that underlies the romance¹ or glamour attaching for sentimental minds to mediæval Christianity and thence to mediæval conditions generally. *Omne ignotum pro magnifico*, in a modified sense, might fitly enough summarize the case. Remoteness in time serves comfortably to shroud under its haze deformities and blemishes which in a present-day counterpart would decidedly jar upon one's feelings. And yet, all the same, that which is so remote in time and space must needs be somewhat visualized for the imagination. For this pictorial purpose some inconsiderable external adjuncts—accoutrements or ceremonies—must float in upon the canvas of the mind, to enliven the mild awesomeness and to link up the present engagingly with the past. These will be all the better for being themselves also of an unhackneyed, uncommon order;

¹ There was a more considerable Roman element of the population in the South East of Gaul than in those regions less adjacent to Italy. The language prevalent there accordingly retained a far greater affinity with the language of the Romans than did that of the outlying parts which were conquered and occupied by the Franks, and hence was called the *Romances*. Here, further, in this Languedoc or Provence region chivalry found its first home, and here the troubadours recited and sang their wild epics of adventure and enchantment, which were dubbed "romances"; romantic lays, because uttered in the Romance tongue. So the term is accounted for by Isaac Taylor in his *Words and Places*.

nor will they be any the worse for being items which our sentimentalist would himself scorn to use or wear or readopt personally. What matters is that they will look all right in the picture. With such accessories supplied, the romance is rendered complete.

To a non-Roman sentimental mind amongst us the thought of an Apostle conveys no romantic impression; he is remote enough in point of time, to be sure; but the nature and content of his Gospel religion is sufficiently familiar to spoil the effect. A mediæval monk meets the requirements far better; his religious practice has a degree of awesome unfamiliarity about it, whilst his distance in time is ample enough for the purpose. Let sandals be put on him in the mental or material picture (though they would look ludicrous on a minister or cleric of one's own denomination next door), and the romantic effect is perfected.

To the same mind there is nothing romantic about a church of modern erection. There may be a little attaching to a closed or ruined one which functioned a century ago. But there is a good deal more calculated to be felt about a Romanist one in like condition, in virtue of the unfamiliar ritual that used to be enacted in it. Let it date from mediæval days, and let ivy be seen sprawling over it, and the acme of romance is attained. The bygone attenders in that building are envisaged as the saintliest of worshippers, compared with those that frequent churches to-day. And the uprush of such a feeling discovers to one his latent innate piety of heart!

There is nothing romantic, similarly, about a modern military officer. It is otherwise with the mediæval knight, clad in his coat of mail. He was the ceaseless performer of deeds of chivalry which sprang, of course, from a religious, holy basis; he could not be conceived of as committing an act of cruelty or treachery or greed, for his thoughts by day and dreams by night were preoccupied with the rescue of the Blessed Sepulchre.

Even remoteness of space or location can of itself work a potent spell in this same domain. The man who is engaged in looking after sheep at home is far from being a romantic figure. He is more likely to be looked on as a crude and vulgar boor. Let him make advances to our romanticist's daughter, and see what short shrift he will meet with. Nay, according to fashionable

evolutionary theory, it was only when man raised himself from and above a level so degraded that religion evolved itself. But plant him away in Umbria, on a hillside, with his shepherd's crook, and he becomes a paragon of innocence and tenderness, and perhaps piety. Distance lends enchantment to the view.

About half a century ago the stunt of idealizing the Working Man of Britain broke out, hot and strong, among our leisured sentimentalists. And H. G. Wells reminiscently relates how he and his student companions at Cambridge decided on their favourites. One chum, E, who hailed from the Fens, was daft on the Cornish fisherman, with his boat and tackle; another, F, an Hampshire man, enthused over the Scottish miner, descending his ladder; whilst the narrator's own fancy rested on the Lancashire operative, he having never himself been to that shire. Meantime, whenever these idealists chanced to come in immediate contact with servants, or with cabmen or porters or plumbers, unthinkingly they adopted a carriage just as superior as did their otherwise less posing neighbours. Propinquity or tangibility altered things.

Montalambert and our countryman, Kenelm Digby, early in the last century, were both fervid panegyrist of the monastic and conventual life; the latter wrote an eleven-volumed history of *The Ages of Faith*. Yet each of them in turn was broken-hearted when his daughter, taking him at his word, became a nun. Up till then, for other men's daughters to immure themselves was a grand and glorious thing.

The romance which one finds in those Middle Ages is not in themselves, but in their strangeness to the imagination: such is the verdict of that historian of English Romanticism, Mr. Beers. "The closer one gets to them," he maintains, "the less romantic they appear." They are like Bunyan's Enchanted Ground, with its thick fog. Lecky similarly declares that, "in few periods have there been so great a difference between the ideals created by the popular imagination and the realities recognized by history."¹

It should be enough for the mind to revert to the barbarous conditions, material and social, of that era, for which neither the contemporary private individual indeed, nor the ecclesiastic, could fairly be reproached. We mean the squalor and the brutishness of those days. Frederic Harrison says that it is one

¹ *Essays*, p. 17.

of the problems which still remain for historians to solve—how the race ever survived the insanitary conditions of the Middle Ages. We think also of the unspeakable medical methods; the miry country tracks along which people literally dragged their loads to market and elsewhere; the unlighted alleys; the countless and inhuman public executions; the crowded and improvised and awful jails; and so forth.

But what contribution was the institutional Church of those days calculated to make to the well-being of conditions, to judge from its record in history? It is notorious that Cardinal Baronius,¹ writing of the tenth century, in a horror concludes that "Christ was then evidently in a deep sleep in the ship, and the ship itself submerged", so shocking is the aspect presented by the papacy itself. As to the fifteenth, it is avowed by Cardinal Bellarmine² that there was then "no respect for holy things—in short, scarcely any religion—left". We need not further labour this point.

On the measure of general depravity and criminality that then obtained it is tempting to expatiate, in view of latter-day Romanist allegations as to the Utopia which Western Europe presented in that pre-Reformation age. But let it suffice to adduce one item from a recognized authority on the subject, Canon A. Jessop, of half a century ago.³ He pointed out, as a matter of no abnormality, how in a single year, 1285, in a Norfolk hundred (Erpingham, N.), no less than twelve poor creatures were murdered, and five met their deaths in brawls, whilst five others committed suicide. Proportionally this would be the same as if Birmingham to-day had annually a thousand murders, not to speak of any other forms of violent death, nor of assaults, thefts, and other offences.

One aspect there is of the subject on which we would slightly linger, namely, the miserable plight of the humbler and labouring element of the population in those days, and the part played by the Church in adding to their yoke instead of helping to ease it; and this in view of the fact that a now archbishop of the Papal Church had once the hardihood to describe this mediæval period as "the golden age of the British workman". They were simply the chattels of the propertied class, and of the land a third was owned by the monastic orders. There are title deeds

¹ *Annales*, 912.

² *Opera*, tom. vi, concis 28.

³ *Nineteenth Century*, February, 1883.

extant in which a serf and his family are handed over as accessories to monkish legatees, as they would be to others. Child labour was a matter of course in those days when primary schools were undreamt of. Runaway labourers were branded on the brow. Even the *Catholic Encyclopædia* acknowledges (xii. p. 184) that the clergy "oppressed the labourers on church lands, keeping them at work even on Sundays". They were among the very last to give up serfdom. Hence in the Peasants' Rising of 1381 the great abbeys were attacked by the serfs with uncommon ferocity: see J. R. Green's *Short History*. The case of St. Albans then might just be instanced. The King (Richard II) took the side of the monastics against the beleaguering "slaves". All concessions were refused, and fifteen of the leading insurgents were publicly hanged on the spot. The bodies having been removed and buried by night by friendly agency, a savage royal order came presently, compelling the friends and relatives to exhume the decomposing corpses and to re-gibbet them with their own hands! And so, says the monk that chronicles it, they not only deserved the name "hangmen", but fittingly performed the hangman's office as well.

This was the "Merrie England" which Romanist scribes for the greater part of the past century tried to foist on our reading public. Doubtless indeed, the monks had quite a merry time of it, but hardly the serf population. But, as Arnold Lunn said eleven years ago¹—and has not to our knowledge since unsaid—we "have seen the magnificent edifice built up by the 'Merry England School' crumble to dust". For this we may largely thank Mr. G. G. Coulton, of Cambridge, the cogency and effect of whose writings on the subject may be fairly gauged by the degree of rancour and animosity with which he has been personally met by members of that school. If they set value on truth first of all, that able scholar's researches would surely have been accorded a different reception even at their hands.

It had been a religious, and an eventually sectarian, phase or outgrowth of the Romanticist Movement which came to birth in Europe near the close of the eighteenth, and reached its consummation in the early part of the nineteenth, century. A recoil in men's minds from the dry, passionless, and emotionless rationalism and the stiff classicism that had for so long before held sway, in the domain of philosophy and art, then made

¹ *Review of the Churches*, April, 1926.

itself markedly felt. Looking outward and backward, even from the simply non-religious viewpoint, which was the attitude assumed by very many of them, the adherents of that movement found it quite easy to credit any selected bygone era with having enjoyed a moral and social standard vastly superior to theirs. Any attempt at verification of such an idea would have spelled to that extent a relapse into the old discarded intellectualist groove.

Whilst this sentimental fever was running its course, former instances of similar illusoriness could afford no warning. Greek and Latin poets had likewise in their time celebrated the golden age when Saturn reigned. Augustine of Hippo had to confute reactionaries of his day who bewailed the dying Paganism and the blessings that had been vanishing with it. Dryden, just a century before, had rhapsodised about the halcyon period,

“ *When wild in woods the noble Savage ran*”.

Distance in space, too, could serve, as we have already noted, as a basis for fantasy where distance in time might not obtain. The Voltaire school, in their enmity to Christianity, acclaimed the, then almost unknown, Chinese as the paragons of virtue and goodness among the peoples of the earth, and asserted the superiority to the Bible of the, as yet unpublished, Eastern Sacred Books. The far-away cows wore long horns.

The religious trend or aspect of the movement had its most marked manifestation in Britain, Sir Walter Scott presenting himself as its leading figure, with Southey and others actively seconding him. It helped mightily to pave the way for the pro-Roman Tractarianism of Newman and his coterie. In his *Apologia* Newman assigns full credit to the (undesigned) service thus rendered by Scott in propelling him Romeward, as does Ronald A. Knox at a later date (in his *Spiritual Aeneid*).¹ The then paucity of Romanists in Great Britain, and the consequent lack of a proper object-lesson derivable from modern actuality and matter-of-fact, immensely facilitated idealization. The industrial era lying still in the womb of the future, no typical “Irish quarter” in the big cities had as yet unfolded its amenities.

But, though it was awhile instrumental in bringing over a tolerable number of recruits to Rome, the movement has for long been on the wane. Even in early Victorian days the famous

¹ F. Schlegel, Werner, Schutz, Adam Müller, Stolberg and others, likewise adopted Popery, from among the ranks of the first German Romanticists.

architect, Pugin, after being seventeen years in that Church which he joined in his sentimental youth, is to be heard exclaiming: "Examine the ordinary Catholic view that prevails. All anterior to the Reformation is regarded and described as a sort of Utopia . . . all holy monks, all holy priests, holy everybody. Such charity, and such hospitality and such unity, when every man was a Catholic! I once believed in Utopia myself, but when tested by stern facts and history it all melts away like a dream."¹ The American H. C. Lea's *History of Sacerdotal Celibacy*, published in the sixties, rendered signal aid in the dutiful task of brushing out this Romanizing mirage: there is no work, in the view of Lecky, more "fitted to dispel the gross illusions concerning the period, which High Church writers have conspired to sustain".²

Not that it has suffered extinction, by any means, though certainly the life-juices of pro-papal propaganda are now in the main drawn from other sources. Even within recent date attempts, costly and elaborate, which, however, never turned out very prosperous, were made in the form of *pageants* at reproducing romantic religious episodes associated with Anglican mediæval days and "revealing the intimate relationship between Rome and England" (as a Jesuit onlooker complacently expressed it). The prevailing vogue of Norman and pre-Norman Christian names among us is a minor unrecognized vestige of its lingering influence. Pious utterances too, of religious mediæval personages, wherein no peculiar merit would be seen had they dropped from a Reformer, are belauded by divines of ours and quoted with an uncommon and special effusiveness.

Cardinal Vaughan in his day issued a book, *Roads to Rome*, in which a number of recruits to the papal fold told their story. Several of these set down as a consideration which had greatly influenced them the lack of fresh "saints" in England since the Reformation, as compared with the multitude of them that adorned the previous age. This argument is curiously two-edged. Let us rule out of count all Protestants and all non-Romanists entirely. Population has so multiplied within the last three or four centuries that the Romanist total aggregate in England now exceeds the total figure for the whole mediæval population. Moreover, according to Newman, the Church's Faith and

¹ *Church and State* (2nd edition), p. 31.

² *History of Morals*, II, p. 328.

doctrine keeps steadily undergoing "development," which surely should facilitate saintliness. Yet "saints" have in Britain been getting fewer! Within Rome's own bounds here, the number canonized during the last century is quite scant in proportion to the number "sainted" throughout the mediæval centuries. Can the explanation be that the presence nowadays of the Protestant factor necessitates a greater circumspection in the culling out of "saints"? How is it, anyway, that during the past post-mediæval period Romanism has not contrived—how is it that at the present moment she does not contrive—at all events in countries preponderantly Romish, to resume and reproduce, aye to improve on, the supposed paradisaical conditions that marked the former Romantic age?

But, apparently, what is intended is a contrast between the numbers amongst Protestants and Romanists respectively in Britain that are entitled to be accounted and called "saints". It is overlooked or disregarded that in the N. T. Epistles all professed believers in the Gospel are indiscriminately spoken of as "saints"—in Greek *hagioi*, the singular form of which is limited in its applicatory use to one or other of the Persons of the Trinity.¹ And as long as Protestantism is consistent with itself it will hold by the Biblical, in preference to the fashionable artificial and technical, sense of the term. However, one of the above Roman recruits notes that the Pope's sole power to canonize "saints" "seems often to be tacitly admitted by many who else would scorn his claims"; and there is some justice in the statement. Even prior to Tractarian and Romanticist days, among the Caroline Anglicans this tendency showed itself. Bishop Jeremy Taylor, according to Coleridge,² "never speaks with the slightest respect and affection of Luther, Calvin, or any other of the great Reformers—at least not in any of his learned works, but he saints every trumpety monk or friar down to the very latest canonisations of the Pope".

Unquestionably an amount of curious inconsistency obtains in the retrospective use and distribution of the appellation "Saint" in certain quarters. One is liable to be checked by some for speaking of Francis or Bernard "as though they had been schoolmates" of the speaker, whereas there is no such

¹ Philippians iv. 21, is really no exception, since "every saint in Christ Jesus" neither singles out nor excludes any given normal professor of the Gospel.

² *Table Talk*, January 4, 1930.

solicitude for the respect due to many of the New Testament names, as Apollos, Martha, Timothy, for instance, not to mention the great Old Testament worthies. As for the Primitive Church, Origen was the father of Biblical exegesis, Clement Alex. of Christian hymnody, Tertullian of ecclesiastical Latin; yet Rome has, on "trumpery" grounds enough, withholden sainthood from them, whilst bestowing it on many others unworthy to unloose their shoes, and she finds those outside her fold who will ape this usage of hers.

Whately rightly regrets, relative to his own Church's Liturgy, that the title Apostle should ever have been supplemented with, or exchanged for, "Saint". (In three or four places we have the absurd tautology "*holy* Apostle *Saint* X"!)

Be it granted that they, the Apostles, were unique—in a certain sense, different in kind from other men; that their inspiration, essentially and not merely in degree, differed from the illumination of other believers; that "the signs of an Apostle" (2 Cor. xii. 12) had a place apart. Yet how is their honour enhanced by investing them with an appellation which in common parlance they must share with a medley of primitive and mediæval nondescripts? Nevertheless, there is this to be said in the way of substantial palliation: there the sainted Apostles and other New Testament persons that are commemorated are never suffered to eclipse or obscure their Lord. "Christ is all" is the keynote of the "Festivals". The grace of Christ is consistently adduced as the secret and the power of those "holy men of old". Contrast the panegyrics of the Old Testament worthies at the close of the Apocryphal Ben-Sirach. Contrast likewise the descantings or the speculations of scores of our preachers and religious scribes on the disposition or the innate genius or the personal courage or goodness which we are to accept as quite sufficiently accounting for what such godly ones became and did. Rather, we have a taking of the cue from Isaiah li. 2: "Call to mind, look at, Abraham." [With what object? To admire him? Nay] "for I called him alone and blessed and increased him"; or from Hebrews xiii. 7., clearer and nearer still, "Keep in mind them that gave you a lead, and did so by speaking to you the word of God; and as you look back on the issue of their career, go on imitating their faith". In the grand unfolding, in a chapter just preceding this latter appeal, of the roll of Old Testament spiritual heroes

and heroines, all achievements are seen to be ascribed to the humble, self-emptying faculty of faith; there is not a tinge of that proneness to adduce and magnify some native talent or potency as adequately explaining a human being's exploits, independently of the grace of God. And, accordingly, the inspired remembrancer has no hesitation in assuring his fellow-Christian correspondents that in the then prosaic present they could equally look for Divine victories in their hearts and in their lives through the medium of an identical faith, only more definitely grounded in the redeeming death and the risen power of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The natural heart of man, uninfluenced by grace Divine, has little welcome for any such rallying appeal. Not only is it the reverse of self-glorifying, but, inasmuch as it points out the sole and all-sufficient resource, it leaves no room for excuse. The pretentious babble of mediæval religious romance, on the other hand, in so far as it leaves the impression that earlier generations, inherently as it would seem, possessed the secret or capacity of achieving heights and flights of sanctity and devotion which we can hardly hope ever to acquire, will always secure an ample measure of acceptance. It affords a convenient salve for the conscience. "The world," observes Dr. Salmon, "likes to have saints—as objects of veneration, not imitation." Men are helped thereby to fancy, self-excusingly, that their situation is less advantageous for godly living than that of others in by-gone times. "The former days were better than these" (Eccles. vii. 10). People like to quarrel with their own age, and to whimper for institutions which, admittedly, had not enough of Christ's spirit to preserve them from disrepute and decay. We have here a perversity that finds its proper complement in the universalist's calculation that penitence and conversion, so commonly obnoxious in this life, become quite facile and spontaneous after death, in the "intermediate state". Truly a heavy responsibility is incurred when men are induced in any degree so to "limit the Holy One". Like as "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, to-day, and for ever", so "My Spirit remaineth among you", throughout all times and eras, is the gracious assurance of our God.¹

¹ Psalm lxxviii. 41; Haggai ii. 5; Hebrews xiii. 8.

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