

A New Edition of Butler's 'Lives of the Saints'

BY REV. PATRICK J. CORISH, M.A., D.D.

I

THE history of Christianity is essentially the story of the forming of Christ in the souls of men, each in his measure. In some cases, a special outpouring of God's grace has been met by a specially heroic human co-operation. In many cases these heroic lives are as yet known only to God, but in many others they have been acclaimed even by the necessarily incomplete judgment of this world and given the honour of public veneration as saints of the Church.

'God is wonderful in His saints'; their lives have always had a fascination for the more run-of-the-mill Christian, who sees in them the power of God's grace and a model which he can hope to approach. But the most immediate and spontaneous effect produced by the lives of the saints has undoubtedly been the emotion of wonder. The great wonder of the saints is, of course, the wonder of their humility and charity, but the wonder more immediately evoked has frequently been something more obvious and more striking, a wonder at the manifestations of divine power which God from time to time for His own purposes allows to be manifested in His saints. It is natural that we demand miracles of a saint, even though they are only accidental to his sanctity. If he does not produce them on the scale demanded, the popular imagination is not slow in supplying what it considers to be a suitable set of miracles. At times its touch is sure, at other times it is not so sure; indeed, the miracles recorded of a saint can sometimes reflect a comparatively unregenerate mentality. Even if the touch is sure, it is never quite so sure as the truth. Popular imagination is very limited, and the miracles tend to repeat themselves within a rather narrow range. In consequence, the personality of the saint is inclined to get lost under the burden of his miracles. There are striking examples in the medieval lives of the Irish saints where the saint has become little more than a peg to hang miracles on—miracles, furthermore, which stress his power almost to the exclusion of other qualities. Unreasonable demands for miracles, of course, are not characteristic of any one age of Christianity; they are a perennial temptation. In the case of the saints of the last four or five centuries, however, it is easier to sort out the truth. There has been a more critical frame of mind generally, and criticism has been applied while the facts or alleged facts were still recent; but the saints of the Middle Ages and Christian antiquity are often clouded

over and sometimes quite distorted by the miracles attributed to them by the human desire to increase their greatness.

The late Father Thurston said well that the formal process of canonization was introduced, not to enable the Pope to make saints, but to stop the Christian people making too many. The natural desire for saints can sometimes go further than distorting saints who existed; it can supply saints who never existed at all. Preachers have always made use of the illustrative story to drive home a moral lesson—the supreme examples are, of course, the parables of the Saviour—and especially in less critical ages it was possible for the characters in the story to wander out of the realms of the imagination and to be accepted as really-existing persons. In consequence, there are some saints honoured in the martyrologies who have no more right to be there than the Prodigal Son.

Problems such as these make a special impact on the task of presenting the lives of the saints to our generation. Critical and sophisticated in its approach, it is not content to have a saint reduced to a string of stereotyped miracles; its more reflecting mind dwells more on the real implications of sanctity, on charity and humility, and its interest is aroused chiefly by the individual, by the man as he really was. The implications of the question: 'Is this true?' are somewhat different in the twentieth century and, say, the tenth. To-day, the writer of the lives of the saints must meet the same requirements from the point of view of edification and critical history, which is all to the good, but imposes on him an intellectual discipline of which his medieval predecessors were largely unaware.

II

In the English-speaking world, hagiography is especially associated with the name of Alban Butler. Born in Northamptonshire in 1710 of an old Catholic family, he became a student of Douai in 1724 and was ordained priest in 1734. Until his return to England in 1749 he was a professor in the college. His *Lives of the Saints* were published in England between 1756 and 1759. On the expulsion of the Jesuits from France he returned to become president of their college at St. Omer, where he died ten years later, in 1773.

Butler had many of the characteristics of the eighteenth-century English 'Garden of the Soul Catholic.' Indeed, his character recalls the remark made by his nephew, Charles Butler, concerning Bishop Challoner: 'very cheerful, but he stopt very short of mirth. Always serene, affable, unaffected, prudent, charitable.' His purpose in writing the *Lives of the Saints* was essentially devotional, but he was by no means ill-equipped from the scholarly point of view, and in the

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¹ *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, ed. Herbert Thurston, xxxii + 720, xxii + 6, 1956. Price 12 gu.

be distorted by the miracles attributed to them to increase their greatness. Thurston said well that the formal process of canonisation, not to enable the Pope to make saints, but to prevent the people making too many. The natural tendency of the imagination sometimes go further than distorting saints and making up saints who never existed at all. Preachers of the illustrative story to drive home a moral message, examples are, of course, the parables of the Gospels. In less critical ages it was possible for the imagination to wander out of the realms of the imagination and create really-existing persons. In consequence, there are many in the martyrologies who have no more than the Prodigal Son.

These make a special impact on the task of canonisation of the saints to our generation. Critical and historical approach, it is not content to have a saint reduced to a set of miracles; its more reflecting mind dwells on the implications of sanctity, on charity and humility, and is chiefly by the individual, by the man as he is. The questions of the question: 'Is this true?' are asked in the twentieth century and, say, the tenth. The lives of the saints must meet the same point of view of edification and critical history, but imposes on him an intellectual discipline which his predecessors were largely unaware.

II

In the modern world, hagiography is especially associated with Butler. Born in Northamptonshire in 1710, he became a student of Douai in 1724 and returned in 1734. Until his return to England in 1749 he was at Douai college. His *Lives of the Saints* were published in 1726 and 1759. On the expulsion of the Jesuits from England he became president of their college at Douai ten years later, in 1773.

Of the characteristics of the eighteenth-century hagiography, Butler's *Soul Catholic*. Indeed, his character recalls his nephew, Charles Butler, concerning Bishop Butler, 'a prudent, prudent, charitable.' His purpose in writing *Lives of the Saints* was essentially devotional, but he was by no means from the scholarly point of view, and in the

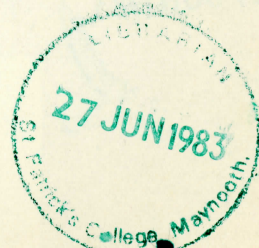
Bollandists, Mabillon and Tillemont he had a fine critical tradition to draw on. Indeed, in the eighteenth century there were some, not merely among rationalists, but also among believers, who tended to become over-critical of the miraculous in the lives of the saints. A century later, French *dévots* could attack Butler for his 'rationalist and Protestant' leanings, but there is no doubt that his prudent and well-informed mind did strike a true balance. He was not credulous or uncritical; he made very good use of the resources available to him; and while in no way blind to the supernatural, he stressed the essentials of sanctity rather than the miraculous element.

III

Naturally, his work has dated. Since he wrote, further beatifications and canonizations have made very considerable additions to the list of the saints. Then, there has been a great further development of critical studies since his day, and this has made much revision of his work inevitable. Again, his style must have sounded tedious and verbose even in the more leisurely days of the eighteenth century. It is quite unsuited for its purpose to-day, and the often lengthy homilies which he added to the lives of the saints, while they contain sound spiritual advice, are even more unsuited to a generation which will be attracted to the saints principally by the historical facts of their lives.

The task of revising 'Butler' was begun by Father Herbert Thurston over thirty years ago. The January volume was published in 1926, the July volume in 1932, and the work was completed in 1938. Most of the work in the July-December volumes was in fact done by Donald Attwater. This new edition, in four volumes, marks the bicentenary of the original publication.¹ Certain cuts have been made in the text to secure a four-volume edition. In these, what survived of Butler's homilies has disappeared, and some 'obscure or uncertain' saints have been omitted, though a few 'ghost-saints' have, through one association or another, managed to keep their place. On the whole, however, more has been added than omitted: there are now 2,565 separate entries compared with 1,486 in the original 'Butler.' The bibliographical and critical notes have been left as Thurston wrote them, but Attwater has taken the opportunity for a further revision of his earlier work, and has made what he rather modestly calls 'some attempt' to bring the bibliographies up to date.

¹ *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, bicentenary edition, revised and supplemented by Herbert Thurston, S.J., and Donald Attwater. Four volumes, royal 8vo., pp. xxxii+720, xxii+692, xx+705, xx+707. London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1956. Price 12 guineas the set of four volumes.



Finally, the whole work has been read and approved by Father Paul Grosjean. All in all, this is a formidable guarantee of authenticity. It has meant that there is very little of Butler's original text left, but it is a commendable *pietas* to retain his name.

The collection, of course, makes no claim to be complete, i.e., to include all who at any time were the object of liturgical veneration as saints. Such completeness is impossible; even the Bollandists do not claim it. One has only to think of the lists in the local martyrologies, especially the Celtic martyrologies, to realize how impossible it is. The twelfth-century martyrology of Úa Gormáin, for instance, contains approximately 3,500 entries, including 72 SS. Colmán. The general criterion for admission of a saint is liturgical veneration in the Western Church. In practice, this means inclusion in the Roman martyrology, though even here some cutting has been necessary, partly because of numbers, partly because even the Roman martyrology has its 'ghost-saints' due to the mistakes of medieval copyists or to the stories of the moralists coming to be accepted as history. Some further saints have been added by reason of their familiarity to Catholics of the English-speaking world. With regard to the Celtic saints one is particularly happy to know that this edition has the personal approval of Father Grosjean.

Twelve guineas is still a large sum of money, but by the standard of modern printing costs the value offered is good. Many people will find fascinating reading in these four volumes. They are an essential ready-reference book for the ecclesiastical historian, but they will interest a much wider public. Their attractively written factual biographies should make a very direct appeal as spiritual reading, presented in handy form, with eight or ten pages to the day, illustrating the workings of God in the soul of man, in all its diversities because of all our diversities, which are perhaps more than usually marked in those in whom God is most wonderful—in His saints.



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