

Mr. Huxley's Father Joseph

GREY EMINENCE. By Aldous Huxley. New York: Harper & Bros. 1941. 342 pp., with index. \$3.50.

Reviewed by CRANE BRINTON

THE rather tame promise of the jacket, that this is "a biography of Father Joseph, the right-hand man and collaborator of Cardinal Richelieu" is indeed amply fulfilled. But just as no novel of Aldous Huxley's was ever simply a novel (there are indeed taxonomists of literature for whom no novel of his was ever properly a novel) so this, his first biography, is at the very least much more than a biography.

It is in part an account, in broad but never text-bookish lines, of the power politics of the early seventeenth century which prepared the way for the French attempt to do what the Germans are attempting to do today—that is, to organize by force an international, or rather supernational, New Order in Europe; and more particularly, of the part played by the Capuchin monk Father Joseph, who had once been Baron de Maffliers, in these power politics. In this, the simplest part of the book, all Mr. Huxley's remarkable powers of narration and of lucid analysis of the "determining conditions" of historical events come into play, and produce a historical work of a very high order, an order sometimes misleadingly called "philosophical." Some of his better-known gifts come also into play. The Aldous Huxley—or is it the old Adam?—who wrote "Antic Hay" can still describe the portraits of Queen Marie Médicis as revealing "a large, fleshy, gorgeously bedizened barmaid." The lover of paradox can still write of Father Joseph, "combining in his own person the oddly assorted characters of Metternich and Savonarola, he could play the diplomatic game with twice the ordinary number of trump cards." And the young modern whose learning was so delightfully, so scabrously, indecent is still able to turn that learning into satire—satire that, like much of Swift's, will be relished by some of his poor, human readers as something rather less exalted than satire: witness, for instance, his description of the painting Rubens would have made of the miraculous cure of Cardinal Richelieu's piles by St. Fiacre, if only St. Fiacre's cure had worked.

But, as critics have noticed, something is happening to the bright young modern. The Voltaire of our Freudian age is turning mystic. "Grey Eminence" is in a part a discourse on mysticism, which, after a very brief account of the Hindu origins and early Christian

development of the mystical tradition, dwells more at length on Father Joseph's teacher, Benet Fitch of Canfield, and on his contemporary, Pierre de Bérulle. Mr. Huxley, like his semantically innocent predecessors in the mystical tradition, who were unable to appeal to Professor Bridgman's "Logic of Modern Physics," cannot break down entirely the wall which separates the mystical experience from the best and noblest and simplest of words. Reduced to words, Mr. Huxley frequently uses Father Benet's phrase, "active annihilation," and his own "one-pointedness," to attempt to describe the mystical experience of oneness with God.

That experience, he insists, is a fact, and subject therefore to what Professor Bridgman calls an operational test. The metaphysical and theological theories which mystics have often used to explain this experience (and sometimes to conceal from themselves the fact that they have not really achieved it in fullness) are not for him facts, but meaningless theories. Here, he maintains, Father Joseph went astray, so far astray that he could try to combine power politics with the mystic life; for under the influence of Father Benet's aberrant acceptance of certain Catholic dogmas as a part of the mystic life, he could identify the glory of France with the will of God. For the psychic goings-on, from miracles to plain catalepsy, which are frequently manifested in the behavior of the apprentice mystic, Mr. Huxley has almost as little regard as for metaphysical or theological theories; to these curiosities of the psychophysical mechanism "the wiser mystics pay as little attention as possible." There remains the long hard way to "active annihilation" which the gifted few must learn by practice under the teaching of a master, as those gifted in the less important wordly skills, like painting or tennis-playing, must learn. Mere reading, even reading great works with

high emotion, will no more make a mystic than such reading will make a tennis player.

A persistent hangover from his eighteenth-century upbringing tempts this reviewer to object to Mr. Huxley's use of Bridgman, that, although everybody, given the proper scientific education, can make the necessary operational test to determine whether what a physicist says is "true," very few people can make the necessary operational test to determine whether what a mystic says is "true." It is, however, plain that in fact ordinary people can no more be educated at present to perform such a test on the work of Professor Bridgman, who is a very good physicist, than they can be educated to perform such a test on the work of Swedenborg, who seems to have been a somewhat muddled mystic. Modern physics is at least as far from common sense experience as is mysticism. There seems indeed to be more agreement among physicists than among mystics. The systems of these latter seem almost as varied and clashing as the systems of philosophers. But according to Mr. Huxley, this is only because unwise mystics have been led to formulate systems. On the central core of their experience they are in discernible agreement. We shall probably have to grant Mr. Huxley his operational test, even though we cannot possibly make it ourselves. Certainly his is the most lucid exposition of mysticism available to the general reader.

Finally, "Grey Eminence," like so much else that appears in print today, is concerned to find a way out of our present difficulties. Mr. Huxley despairs completely of politics. The road trod by Father Joseph's bare feet has led straight to totalitarian society, which Mr. Huxley apparently thinks as inevitable for the democracies as for the rest of the world. Our only hope is in small groups "on the margin," which, under the leadership of a few "theocentric saints" will practise "goodness politics" instead of power politics. Only small groups can practise such politics, since "the quality of moral behavior varies in inverse ratio to the number of human beings involved." The immediate outlook is thus very dark. At most, such small groups can perform a certain antiseptic and antidotal function in our society, and preserve it from total ruin. "Society can never be greatly improved, until such time as most of its members chose to become theocentric saints." And cease to write books?

Crane Brinton, author of "The Anatomy of Revolution," is Professor of History at Harvard University.



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Almanac for Fall Reading

AMY LOVEMAN

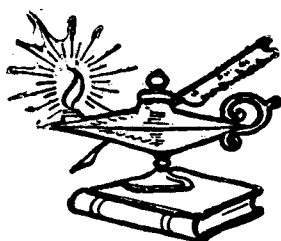
OCTOBER 20

◆ A dazzling personality, red-headed, impulsive, and determined, Barbara Villiers, mistress of Charles II of England walks out of history to love and play and charm in Margaret Gilmour's biography, *The Great Lady*. ◆ Max Miller deserts the waterfront of California for the rest of the state, describing the golden enchantment of its life in *It Must Be the Climate*. ◆ California may be lovely but Hawaii is very heaven to judge from the title of Walker Winslow's novel built about a young psychiatrist's experiences on the island, *Man in Paradise*. ◆ Less pleasant but a place to haunt the imagination is the scene of Cecile Huise Matschat's detective story, *Murder in Okefenokee*, the great swamp which Miss Matschat described in an earlier book on the Suwanee River. ◆ Adventure and bandits galore make their bow in Charles B. Driscoll's *Pirates Ahoy!* ◆ Music to soothe the savage breast will be found in David Hall's *Record Book Supplement*, which rounds up and adds to the original work records of the last twelve months. The book's an open sesame to good music. ◆ Edgar Johnson in *A Treasury of Biography* presents skillfully chosen extracts from some of the great biographies of all ages, supplying deft connecting passages, where cuts have been made to hold the narrative taut. The busy man's short cut to some of the best reading to be found. ◆ Armchair travellers can go ajourneying in Charles Edward Crane's *Winter in Vermont*, and Nancy Wilson Ross's *Furthest Reach* which last makes the states of Oregon and Washington regions far too interesting to be visited only vicariously. ◆ Diplomatic Washington at its teas, minding its p's and q's or becoming embroiled in social difficulties that are incidentally part of affairs of state, is depicted in *Washington Waltz*, by Helen Lombard, wife of a member of the French Embassy. ◆ Unhappy, far-off things are recounted in a book whose title, however, sounds a note of hope in *The End Is Not Yet: China at War* by Herryman Maurer. ◆ Big business after the depression and the impact of changing business outlooks on its methods and chances form the background for the interesting novel in which John Harriman follows *The Career of Philip Hazen*, who loses out in Wall Street deals but wins at love and character. ◆ H. L. Mencken looks back over the early years of his journalistic experience in *Newspaper Days*, letting the reader in on some secret passages and pranks of his novitiate as well as

giving him insight into the ways and workings of newspaperdom. Highly entertaining reading. ◆ A puff of wind, a gentle breeze, a vigorous blow, and at last a hurricane—that's the course that's plotted in *Storm*, a novel which is also a study in meteorology, and which George R. Stewart makes exciting both as science and as an adventure story.

OCTOBER 21

◆ Readers who sigh with satisfaction at the prospect of a good substantial novel—hundreds of pages which in older times would have made a three-decker—will have a chance to indulge their inclination in *The Ivory Mischief*, by Arthur Meeker, Jr., whose background is the time of Louis XIV but whose tale of two beautiful sisters has the contemporaneity of any full-bodied and psychologically interesting romance. ◆ And for those who love a doctor novel there's *Bright Scalpel*, by Elizabeth Seifert, while for the readers who want their fiction up to the moment in subject matter, *All That Seemed Final*, a tale of the English, laid mainly in the London of 1939 to 1940, by Joan Colebrook, and *The Fort*, by Storm Jameson, which plays in a ruined cellar in wartime Paris where a group of men are gathered together with one in command who suddenly realizes that this moment in the present war is paralleling an experience of his in the last conflict, are coming along. ◆ Told with reverence and touching piety, John W. Lynch's *A Woman Wrapped in Silence*, is the story of Mary and Christ in verse. ◆ There's a chance to get perspective on the ideologies of recent times, their economic and political origins and their influence on the present, in Oscar Cargill's *Intellectual America*, subtitled *Ideas on the March*. ◆ What the *Economic Consequences of the Second World War* are likely to be is discussed by Lewis L. Lewin. ◆ There's a spate of books on the arts, *The American Artist and His Times*, by Homer Saint Gaudens, *The Art of Walt Disney*, by Robert D. Field, *The Best Plays of 1940-41*, and *The Year Book of the Drama in America*, edited by Burns



Mantle, *The Early Chirico*, by James Thrall Soby, the only monograph in English on its subject. ◆ There's an authorized biography, too, of *John McCormack*, in which L. A. G. Strong writes sympathetically of the singer, and a volume of the hilarious sketches by Cornelia Otis Skinner with which that excellent monologist delights her audiences. It's called *Soap behind the Ears*. ◆ The lovers of diaries and letters will welcome Ernest de Selincourt's edition of *The Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth* and the romantic soul will rejoice in *Love Letters of Famous Men and Women* in which Ernest F. Dell lets queens like Anne Boleyn and Victoria rub elbows with democratic Americans and men and women, titled and untitled, of other lands. ◆ Help's to hand for the admirers of Gwen Bristow's novels whose shelf space is limited for the three tales which have made her reputation have been gathered into one volume, *The Louisiana Trilogy*. ◆ Nard Jones furnishes a historical romance in *Scarlet Petticoat* which carries its heroine, a Portsmouth barmaid, from England to America and portrays the experiences of the first white woman to settle in the Northwest in 1823. Based on a true incident. ◆ Sturdy womanhood in a later period is pictured in the reminiscences which Frances Ellen Fitz put in Jerome Odlum's hands to weave into a lively chronicle in *Lady Sourdough*. The lady of the title went off to Alaska, where she lived the rough life of the men, matched them at their own endeavors, and made her pile with the best of them. ◆ Red letter day for *The Saturday Review*. Its contributing editor, William Rose Benét publishes *The Dust Which Is God*, an autobiographical novel in verse. Take it from us who are not impartial—it's good.

OCTOBER 22

◆ George Russell Harrison's stimulating discussion of physics in its present aspects entitled *Atoms in Action* makes its reappearance with the addition of a chapter on Machines in War to give it fresh timeliness. ◆ With Moscow holding the headlines there's special aptness in the publication of Eric Estorick's *Stafford Cripps*. ◆ In her account of the experiences of an American-born Polish woman's *Arrest and Exile*—Madame Kochanka was caught in the Russian invasion of her country and sent to Siberia—Lilian Mowrer tells a horrifying tale of suffering and an inspiring one of human courage. ◆ Two books appear bearing on the countries at war, Hitler's *Counterfeit Reich*, by Karl Robert, a study of Nazi economy, and *Thailand: The New Siam*, by Virginia Thompson. ◆ Battles long ago are recalled in a biography of *Clara Barton*, by Blanche Colton Williams, who paints a sympathetic picture of this "daughter of destiny" whom the soldiers of the Civil War came to know so well and who was the founder of the Red Cross in America. ◆ It's a long jump from Miss Barton to *Women*