

In His Company the Best of Talk

"Literary Distractions," by Ronald Knox (Sheed & Ward. 232 pp. \$3.50), is a collection of essays, ranging in subject from Pascal to detective stories, by the late Catholic chaplain at Oxford University. Literary critic and essayist, Ben Ray Redman, assesses these collected pieces for us.

By Ben Ray Redman

RONALD KNOX, who died last year, belonged to a vanishing species—he was a true man of letters. There are not many of them left among us, and it is improbable that there has ever been another quite like the Anglican Bishop of Manchester's son who made the journey to Rome in 1917, became a priest in charge of the souls of Oxford's undergraduates, and then turned from his pastoral task to undertake singlehanded a monumental work of scholarship and piety that had once taxed the abilities of Lancelot Andrewes and a committee composed of almost fifty of England's finest scholars.

For learning and wit to be found housed in the same man is not uncommon, and it is probable that as many writers have suffered for versatility as have scored by it. But where shall we look to match the combined wit and learning and versatility of Monsignor Knox, who spent nine years translating the Holy Bible into the English of our own day, and gave other years to the writing of detective stories and sermons, satire and scriptural exegesis, essays, lectures, verse, and letters to the papers; and who at the same time sustained a lifelong love affair with literature that gave him possession of the best that men have thought and said from the days of Greek glory and Roman grandeur?

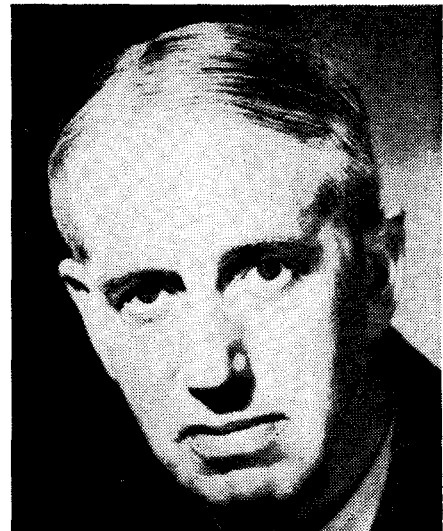
In the present volume we find Ronald Knox the familiar essayist and genial lecturer. His subjects, seventeen and various, include the wit of Dr. Johnson and the verse of Hilaire Belloc, the sublime poetry of Crashaw

and the bathos of James Grainger, the part played by the sea through several centuries of Greek life and literature, Chesterton's romances and Chesterton's detective stories, the art of translation, the author's experiences with French, pilgrimages, Pascal, the Barsetshire novels, the Ingoldsby legends, Birmingham, ground rules for detective fiction, Robert L. Stevenson, and "The Man Who Tried to Convert the Pope." Whatever the subject, the tone is always urbane, sometimes colloquial, and unaffectedly charming. Humor and good humor are pervasive, with wit often giving an edge to humor, but never thrusting itself presumptuously into the discourse.

Writing of another's wit, Dr. Johnson's, Monsignor Knox cunningly touches the truth when he tells us that "the intellectual trick which is perhaps most characteristic of him is that of coining a phrase, usually with one good long word at the heart of it, to act as ballast, which sets on record for all time, marmoreally, Johnson's attitude to this or that, this person or that." Again he speaks with perfect accuracy when he declares that "Crashaw's poetry was all religion, and Crashaw's religion all poetry." The enigmatic figure of Pascal baffles him, as it has many another; he can ask pertinent questions, but give no answers. Of Chesterton and Belloc, of Trollope and Stevenson, he writes with affection as well as sensitive understanding.

On the subject of translation he is illuminating, and in passing he demolishes the myth that would have us believe that the Authorized Version has been a stylistic inspiration for our greatest writers. His quotations from Grainger's "The Sugar-cane: A Poem in Four Books" are hilarious; but he is funniest, and on his own, in "French With Tears." Perhaps the most entertaining paper of all, however, is the one that describes the efforts of George Townsend, Canon of Durham, to persuade Pius IX to convoke a new General Council of Christians with the aim of undoing the evil work of the Council of Trent.

These hints as to the contents and quality of "Literary Distractions" must suffice. In Ronald Knox's company one enjoys the best of talk, and at the same time drinks in "large draughts of intellectual day."



Ronald Knox—"... perfect accuracy."

Gentle Gadfly

"More in Anger," by Marya Mannes (Lippincott. 189 pp. \$3.50), castigates certain flaws in our society abhorrent to the author. Harry Golden, author of the best-seller "Only in America" and editor of the Carolina Israelite, evaluates her strictures.

By Harry Golden

MISS MANNES is a handsome woman and she writes a handsome prose. "More in Anger" is a series of loosely-jointed essays which criticize modern American complacency, weakness, self-satisfaction, fat-dripping prosperity, and lack of discipline. What is important is that, though Miss Mannes is critical, she is not cranky. And while these essays range from war and peace to censorship and art and partisan politics, "More in Anger" is still an emotional whole, made so because the book is lightly veined with humor and fortified with common sense. The author's tone is conversational but always precise. She has an inherent sense of drama and an abiding respect for words and sentences arranged in rhythmic order.

Her book is legitimately criticism, but it can be called just as honestly a series of gripes. She is charming and calm and sane. She does not want heads rolling. But a reader can detect behind her modulated prose an irresistible urge to knock these same heads together.

Miss Mannes's are essentially *ad hominem* arguments. She counts the faults of our society. They are the same faults about which all of us





Marya Mannes—"... always precise."

politely complain after coffee, the very complaints which do not reveal us as thinkers, but serve as indices for what class we belong to, and where we come from, and what we do, and indicate whether or not we want to be invited again.

In short, Miss Mannes's book, rather than a document, is a gesture. It makes sense, but it is platitudinous.

For instance: Miss Mannes says of the older woman who assumes the pose of youth that "she does it because she has been told to do it by the advertising media." She says of the large woman, consigned by her size to the back-halls of fashion, that there is no reason why she cannot be dressed "both fashionably and seductively. Designers and dress manufacturers could see to this if they wanted to. But not only would it demand more material and cut down profit; it would militate against the foundation-makers and slenderizing salons and pill-producers of the nation. For then a woman could be attractive without their help and that would never do."

This is just the sort of talk that never aggravates a dinner discussion. It is cogent, reasoned, and a little dull. Because it is wrong. Business and advertising are a reflection of the American middle class—in fact, they are the soul of the American middle class, and they expound as best they can its values, dreams, and beliefs. We may think these are shoddy, but it is not the businessman's fault. Manufacturers have experimented: the mass of women will not buy the matronly dress any more than they will buy sensible shoes.

Miss Mannes's publishers say her book is a personal credo. That is exactly what it is not. Miss Mannes leaves you nothing to gossip about. Nothing she says would ever anger you or make you indignant. You

agree; that is her chief fault. She is also naïve.

She deplores the pornographic violence of the comic books as a cause of juvenile delinquency, black leather jackets, and the complete disrespect for authority. All of us nod yes. All of us know that in some way comic books are related to violence. But all of us know, Miss Mannes included, that comic books are not the only cause of juvenile violence.

Similarly, she goes on to condemn politicians not only for their inability to live up to their campaign promises but also for their inability to make meaningful campaign promises. No one wants to be put in the position—God forbid—of defending a politician, but one could offer the demurrer that, rightly or wrongly, American statesmen are not independent of their precincts.

The ideal politician in Miss Mannes's book speaks for himself. She has him make an inaugural address. He promises much: honesty, responsibility to his Constitutional powers, equal rights and equal responsibilities for the Negro, cessation of nuclear testing, and "certain measures [italics mine] which will deprive you of certain luxuries which you do not need for the urgencies which are to be required of us as a nation. . . ." One not too drowsy from that delightful bit

of bourbon-and-water after dinner might think this speech a little like the old-fashioned hoop skirt: It covers everything but touches nothing. Miss Mannes wants to change society by inveighing against it. A long empirical history proves this is bootless. Nor can one change society by boasting, as she does, that "it was different and better when I was young." The kids know that since we were young there has been a lot of water under the bridge. To change society at all one has to discover *why* American women want to be skinny before persuading them that it is attractive to be fat. Miss Mannes's argument disappoints us because she is not after any of the whys. Her argument is that *she* doesn't need to change—society does.

YET there is a brilliance and a hard core to her prose. Her only irritating trait is her defense of women against the misrepresentations of men. This is a trait many an intelligent woman indulges, despite the fact that most men think of women as people. It is a perplexing trait, perhaps because it is so self-conscious. Other than the fact that you marry one, most men have nothing against women. Some even think of every last one of them as just so much delicious French pastry.



Pick of the Paperbacks



DECLINE AND FALL. By Evelyn Waugh. *Universal*. \$1.25. This hilarious account transports young Paul Pennyfeather from Oxford student days to the *grand monde*, and lets him down somewhat wiser at the gateway to a theological career.

THE AMERICAN WOMAN. By Eric John Dingwall. *Signet*. 50¢. An English anthropologist casts a stern glance at the American female and comes up with some conclusions that, if not flattering, make lively reading.

PATHS IN UTOPIA. By Martin Buber. *Beacon*. \$1.50. Theologian-philosopher Buber interprets the idea of utopia, as Marx saw it, as Lenin put it into practice, and as the utopian ideal is enacted in the modern state of Israel.

THREE GREAT PLAYS OF EURIPIDES. *Mentor*. 75¢. The Euripides trio, "Medea," "Helen," and "Hippolytus," in a new and poetic translation by Rex Warner.

INDIAN SUMMER. By William Dean Howells. *Everyman*. \$1.35. This early

Howells novel (1886) tells, in an urbane fashion, about some intelligent Americans at their leisure in Florence.

THE WAPSHOT CHRONICLE. By John Cheever. *Bantam*. 50¢. The first novel, by one of America's best short-story writers, won last year's National Book Award. It's a gusty tale of an irrepressible family whose sons leave their village to seek fortune in the big city.

THE OCTOPUS. By Frank Norris. *Bantam*. 50¢. Written at the turn of the century by one of America's most rugged realists, this is a powerful story of California wheat farmers and their fierce struggle against the new railroads.

YEATS: THE MAN AND THE MASK. By Richard Ellmann. *Everyman*. \$1.55. One of the century's great poets is the subject of this critical biography, which, though scholarly, presents a rounded portrait of an intensely creative and complex man.