

Book Review

***MY DEAR TIME'S WASTE.* By Fr. Brocard Sewell, O. Carm.
(Saint Albert's Press, 45s.)**

Review by William Stoddart

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Fr. Sewell is perhaps best known as editor of *The Aylesford Review*. The present book, his autobiography, consists mainly of a sequence of recollections and anecdotes about the people he has known throughout the various stages of his life. Many of these people are highly interesting—Chesterton, Belloc, Eric Gill and Bernard Kelly, for example—and one jogs along happily with Fr. Sewell's reminiscences. His association with these distinguished individuals, however, loyal and unquestioning though it undoubtedly was, obviously did not involve his being very deeply engaged in their notable intellectual activities. This makes the book a trifle on the light side—something it would not have been if, over and above the personal recollections, Fr. Sewell had sought to convey to a greater extent the specific nature of these men's original thought.

What strikes one most on reading this book, however, is the extent to which the arrival of the post-war period has been a watershed in the life of Fr. Sewell. Gone completely is the influence of Eric Gill with his implacable rejection of the shoddy and the false, no matter the manner in which these might turn up. No trace of Gill's masterly re-affirmation of the traditional truths is to be found in the latter part of the book. A host of "contemporary" personalities of every kind and degree of folly, mischief and ugliness cram Fr. Sewell's pages. Atheists, miscreants, *nouvelle vague* writers, all receive studiously indulgent mention and are blandly treated as normal and positive members of society. Just as, however, one tended to "blame" Fr. Sewell for not being a deeper and more intimate spiritual companion of Eric Gill and the rest, so here one must "excuse" him, for it is evident that he is blissfully unaware of the implications of his protégés' activities, and of what it is, for example, that they are "sincere" about.

The text "Judge not that ye be not judged" is not quoted by Fr. Sewell, but one guesses, sadly, that it is to these words that he would probably turn in order to justify his permissive attitude towards all and sundry in the modern age. By the same token, he would probably be unsympathetic to those of us who, mindful of sacred truth—and its lack of respect for persons—might feel inclined to "judge" some of our contemporaries. Nevertheless it is necessary to point out that Fr. Sewell indulges in "judging" too. For example, he finds great fault with the police (it may be correctly) for the part they played in the trial of Stephen Ward; he has elsewhere waxed indignant about the C.N.D. marchers who were jailed under the official secrets act. More important, his positive findings (often in the case of the most dubious of characters) are also "judgements" (even though favourable), and as such would also fall under the ban of the words of Christ quoted above. In passing, it is surely worth making the point that the handing out of praise to unworthy persons (except within precisely defined limits) is a cruel implicit criticism of those who are worthy—be these the saints who have gone before us, or simply humble people of good will.

The main Scriptural illustration of the "judge not that ye be not judged" injunction is that of the sun shining and the rain falling on just and unjust alike. The point here is that, notwithstanding, the two categories remain distinct. In the religious life two attitudes (pertaining to two distinct "levels") are possible: either (1) on the basis of the words of Christ quoted above, one "turns the other cheek" and remains impassive in the face of all contingencies, one cuts oneself free from the futile chain reaction of rights and wrongs, and one forswears judgment, both favourable and unfavourable; or (2) recognizing that there is both divine and human justice and that God is not mocked, one "judges" under Christ and in His light—remembering that He is the ultimate judge of all things. Christ enjoined us to love one another, but He did not forbear to speak of a "generation of vipers." There is no degree of spirituality, however high, which requires us to nurse vipers at our bosom, and there is nothing in Christianity which would restrain us from calling a spade a spade. Christ forgave the woman taken in adultery (who by this time acknowledged her fall and was repentant); He did not pretend that she had not sinned.

Fr. Sewell's confusion of levels and a certain weakness in logic are somewhat irritating, but it would be unjust and pointless to blame him for not being a Bernard Kelly—a Thomist metaphysician and associate of Eric Gill to whom Fr. Sewell refers.

It is a commonplace that the religious life involves the renunciation of the world. If this were so when the world was relatively "normal," how much more is it true today! Fr. Sewell is at pains not to "reject" contemporary trends. Indeed, he makes it his business to "accept" irresponsible, ignorant (but far from unpretentious) innovators in literature, ideology and morals. Though not actually stated, it is implied that this is all part of "charitableness." But here we must see what the Scriptures have to tell us: the Golden Rule involves (1) loving God and (2) loving one's neighbour as oneself. It cannot be stressed too much that the first clause has absolute priority, and that the second is dependent upon it. This means that while love of God is absolute and unconditional, love of one's neighbour is relative and conditional. The injunction itself makes this clear by its use of the words "loving one's neighbour *as oneself*." This means that one's neighbour, just like oneself, must expect to be treated harshly, if the need arise (if one is an evildoer, for instance). The contemporary error is to obscure the conditional character of love of one's neighbour, and also to invert the order of the two clauses (if not, indeed, to dispense with the first clause altogether).

It is important that the first clause of the Golden Rule should be quoted in full: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind (*et in tota mente tua*)." (Matthew, XXII, 37). It is characteristic of a mindless age that while the first two modes are now taken in as vague a sense as possible, the third mode is disregarded entirely. This is not said at the expense of Fr. Sewell, but at the expense of the contemporary wreckers (small fry though most of them are) whom, albeit somewhat self-consciously, he befriends. If we have turned our backs on St. Thomas Aquinas (and enthusiasm for the quasi-Marxist views of Teilhard de Chardin would suggest that we have), it is probably too much to hope (now that some interest is shown in the non-Christian religions) that a study of Buddhism (orthodox Oriental Buddhism, that is, not Western or modern counterfeits) will teach us to abhor the deadly sin of mindlessness—an open door to hell and a "sin against the Holy Spirit" for which there is no forgiveness. The most characteristic manifestation of contemporary mindlessness is the well-nigh total ignorance of the concept and reality of *orthodoxy*. From the youthful Chesterton to the "new writers" of the present day, *quelle dégringolade!*