

BOOK REVIEWS

COCKERELL by Wilfrid Blunt: Hamish Hamilton, 1964, 50s.

MANY members of the Society must have felt a thrill of pleasure on learning that, little more than two years after his death, the life history of our first President was to be given to us by Mr Wilfrid Blunt. But they may not have expected so handsome a volume, weighing two and a quarter pounds and costing two and a half, excellently illustrated, while the Fitzwilliam of the endpapers and the nine portraits of the jacket are an inspiration; so is the one-word title. The publisher must be congratulated as well as the author. It is well that Mr Blunt should have left the activities of Eton for the leisure of Compton, or he could never have accomplished so quickly a task that involved the reading of seventy-seven volumes of a diary written in the beautiful but microscopic hand that some of us knew so well, and of how many thousand letters we cannot guess.

It was a blessed day when Cockerell, at the age of twenty-five, ceased to be a coal-merchant, but perhaps a blessing too that he had been one. For he had learnt business methods and the life-long habit of answering letters immediately. And his early hobby of shell-collecting had taught him the observation of minute differences which meant so much to the student of manuscripts and illuminations. (It is characteristic that on his first visit to Ruskin and the Lake District, before he was twenty, he had the time between trains at Carnforth to collect seventeen species.) Naturally, to members of the Society, the six brief years in which he worked for Morris, first in the cataloguing of his Library, then as secretary of the Kelmscott Press, have their special interest. It was a strange transition to the contentious *ménage* of the Blunts in Sussex: shipwreck in the Gulf of Suez was one of the lesser trials in his experience of that impossible family. From it Cockerell emerged with the greatest credit. When father and daughter had each decided that the other was slightly mad, he well might suggest that this may be 'not a good basis for mutual understanding'. It is a comfort to learn that the author stands no nearer to the poet than second cousin twice removed.

But, of course, far the most important part of Cockerell's life begins in 1908, a few months after his marriage, when on a salary

of £300 he set about the thirty years task of converting the Fitzwilliam 'from a pigstye to a palace'. The words are rhetoric. Those whose memory goes back to pre-Cockerell days would hardly think of the Fitzwilliam as a pigstye, but as one of those dull and depressing places that sixty years ago most museums and picture galleries were. It was a happy thought to include a photograph taken in 1887 with one of the same room in 1937. Later generations hardly know how much they owe to the humanizers of our museums, among whom I take Cockerell to be the pioneer. Many besides the author must have thought of him as the creator rather than curator. It is not so much 'the scrounger of genius' but the creator of order and beauty to whom our admiration and gratitude are due.

Ruskin was his first deity, Morris his second. Both were dead when he was little more than thirty, though both remained alive for him to the end. But there was no more impressive figure in his life than Dame Laurentia, Abbess of Stanbrook, to whom Mr Blunt devotes his ninth chapter. The friendship of the lifelong agnostic and the christian saint lasted for nearly fifty years till her death in 1953, and the selection from some fifteen hundred letters of the one or the other fills the last sixty or seventy pages of *The Best of Friends*, certainly the most notable part of that book.

Cockerell was fortunate in his life, except for the tragedy of his wife's long illness. He was, no doubt, not the perfect husband and father, and at most times was open to the criticism which an honest (and humorous) biographer does not spare. But how much more there is on the other side, without which this book would be superfluous – the courage, integrity, generosity, kindness, scholarship, love of beauty, the genius for friendship and the undying interest in his fellow men. The last chapter consists mainly of quotations from the diary and they make pathetic reading: yet how magnificently undefeated the old man, more than ten years bedridden, remained! His very last letter to *The Times*, written within two months of his death, has all the old authority, even if for once he was wrong in a fact. Not a great man, perhaps, but a good one, and certainly a great personality.

This is an age of good biographies and memoirs, but there can be few to equal this. There is nothing more conducive to good writing than a good rich subject-matter, but here there was almost too much: the task of selection must have been mighty difficult.

In the nine pages of index it is amusing to see what names are *not* there. Misprints are few and inconspicuous. The Doves Press did not close in 1911, nor the Ashdene in 1933 (p. 80). If the date 1930 on p. 273 is correct, that is hardly towards the end of his life, and the map would not place Morris' Merton works very near Epsom.

A. L. IRVINE

ISABELLA GILMORE: SISTER TO WILLIAM MORRIS by Janet Grierson: S.P.C.K., 1963, 25s.

Who was Isabella Gilmore? A vigilant reader of the Society's publications might answer, 'a sister of William Morris', but, I suspect, very few besides. The name does not occur in the index of Mackail, nor of the *Letters*, except as appended to one of the sisters – unfortunately the wrong one. And there the only recorded achievement of 'Izzy' is that in 1877 she cut her brother's famous hair.

Because of his lonely fame some have supposed William Morris to have been an only child. In fact there was a Victorian family of nine, of whom Isabella was the seventh, eight years younger than William, whom she survived by twenty-six years. At the age of eighteen she made a most happy though childless marriage with a naval officer whose whiskered portrait in this book is quite monumentally Victorian. Left a widow at forty, her life of service began. In face of family opposition she chose the training of a nurse at Guy's Hospital, in days when that was thought no profession for a lady – and this book shows why it should have been so. Before her three years' contract was completed she found her vocation, still under family disapproval. It was Bishop Thorold of Rochester whose faith and patience and persistence prevailed.

So this book is really the story, very well told, of her work as a deaconess and her part in the revival of that order. If the interest ever flags, it is not till the scene is carried to faraway Lahore with Isabella not present; and Clapham is here more interesting than Canada or South Africa. It must be remembered that her mother was a deeply religious woman and that William himself went up to Oxford as a prospective High Church priest, though the family religion ran in the other direction, of Puritanism. He is recorded as saying to his sister, 'I preach

socialism, you practise it'. But socialist she certainly was not. His creed of fellowship rarely included care for the individual: her inspiration was the profound religious faith and the charity that sprang from it, which made every suffering individual an object of love. This is the story of a great and most human saint.

The Society may claim a paternal interest in this excellent book, for it was the desire of our Honorary Secretary¹ to see the chapel which in the last year of Morris' life was designed for the Deaconess House at Clapham by Philip Webb, that led Deaconess Grierson to delve into records and unearth the story of her almost forgotten predecessor and add a new name to the roll of great Victorian women. The author, like Isabella herself, writes excellent English, the book is pleasantly produced, and the proof-reading scrupulous. Only (p. 107) one may suggest that for a journey from Clapham to Worthing *train* would be better than *tram*. Lastly it is good to know that one whose name was Morris before it became Gilmore, did beautiful embroidery.

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¹ Mr Graeme Shankland.