

Liber Pluscardensis 1: August 1949

We have borrowed our title from that account of Scottish history written at Pluscarden in the late 15th century but our Chronicle will be a much more informal and much less valuable historical document than its famous namesake, a letter, rather, to the many friends at Pluscarden, on things we hope will be of common interest. We are indeed not without hope that this little pamphlet may become the official organ of the body to be known as the “friends of Pluscarden” – but of that more anon. Meanwhile we hope you will find what we have to see of our priory and yours is not without interest, and shall also be glad to know if you would like another copy when and if we get another to press.

In the world today craftsmanship is gradually becoming a matter of machine manipulation, and many mechanics and engineers are real craftsmen in this new way. Monastic houses, by their very nature, can be places where the traditional handwork is kept alive. Good workmanship, in itself a virtue, can be doubly so by necessity. The intelligent use of machinery as possible and monasteries large enough to for machines. Here at Pluscarden we have neither the means nor the room to house them. In particular our carpenter’s shop is so primitive that it would be easily recognisable by St Joseph himself. Perhaps also he would approve of the setting. Surely not many carpenters are housed in what was once the sacristy monastic church. This, and the Lady Chapel, I the only parts of our church restored to use, signifying well enough the two aspects of our life, not independent but complementary. From the chapel ascends the prayer, and from the workshop, much of the material restoration of our monastery. Perhaps more will be said later of what has been done, and of our future expectations.

T.C.S.

In our own days artist and scribes are still at work in many monasteries, especially in those with a life is contemplative rather than active. To mention but a few, there are the Abbeys of Maria Lasch and Beuron in Germany, many, many abbeys of the Solesmes congregation, and the Abbey of St Cecilia at Ryde on the Isle of Wight. Much beautiful work of a religious nature is produced, for instance, at Maria Lasch which breathes the atmosphere of the mediaeval monastic schools. Our own activities in the realm of calligraphy at Prinknash, Farmborough and Pluscarden, take the form of Christmas cards, calendars, prayer book pictures, altar-cards and prayer-cards. This is a branch of religious art which it should be possible to develop in the course of time to greater proportions. In former times the books needed to carry out the liturgy in the monastic choirs had to be written and bound by hand. Scribes had an important place in the monastery. Considering the time needed to make each book, and the use to which it was to be put, it was natural that no expense or trouble should be spared to make it as beautiful as possible. Just how well those monks did their work we can see from the examples in the British Museum and elsewhere. The so-called "dark ages" are justly regarded as the golden age of beautiful books. With the invention of printing much of the need for handwritten books ceased, although such works would be always treasured and sought after. Printing was a boon to the multiplication of copies but the artistic value of books necessarily suffered, and this decline has gone on even to our own day. In the 20th century, thanks to the efforts of craftsmen like Eric Gill, Edward Johnson and Rudolph Koch, a notable improvement is now apparent in typography.

W.H.C.

Walls have ears

Have you ever had to strip a wall of ivy? And when I say ivy I don't mean those delicate little tendrils here and there, such as one sees growing, for example, on any young tree. I mean ivy such as you see on the walls of an ancient ruin - such as our ruins here at Pluscarden - ivy which has been growing for many years, and, like the tree in the Canticle *ad humorem mittit radices suas*, it pushed the roots deep into the soil in search for moisture: ivy which is a thorough grip on the wall, and does not only established itself *against* the wall, but has grown *into* the wall, forcing great blocks of stone out of position.

There is much food for thought in the stripping of all such ivy. Especially as - so I am told - there is a very close parallel between the workings of nature and supernatural, between the laws of the natural and the supernatural. Perhaps that was why our Lord was so fond of taking some natural phenomenon, and by it illustrating the supernatural life. I don't know. I am no theologian!

Some of these ivy “stems” which we are considering, and on which we are working, are 3 inches and more in circumference. They were not always so. Once they were delicate little strands trailing up the wall: a child could have pulled them off easily. But they were allowed to grow – in fact we are told they were encouraged - to get hold of the wall, to force their way into the interstices, forcing out cement, and taking the place of it. A child can't deal with that ivy now! It is a strong man's job. Nor is it of any avail just to clip the leaves; if the will is to be saved, the roots of that ivy must be torn out and what roots they are too! And all this hard work began with those attractive tendrils of ivy which were allowed, even encouraged, to grow.

The moral is very obvious, so obvious as not to need labouring. The monk, busy at his “manual prayer”, recalls a passage in his holy rule, where St Benedict recommends the monk to take hold of his evil thoughts *while they are yet little*, in embryo, *and – them down on the rock, Christ.*

He recalls another passage, a recommendation to the Abbot, let him not shut his eyes to the faults of offenders; but *as soon as they appear* let him strive with all his might *to catch them out*. It is the easier way. Habits don't grow in a day, and it is easier to check a bad habit at the beginning, before it has passed from the stage of acts and becomes a fixed manner of acting.

There are, of course, many consoling thoughts suggested by the ivy. For instance, the brother may like to console himself with the thought that, as “this magnificent rooms of ivy did not come to such perfection in a day, what was the growth of many years, and it owes its beauty to its stability and stubborn clinging to the wall”; so neither he nor anyone else will attain his perfection in a day. Only by clinging stubbornly to the wall, like the ivy, will he attain his full growth. And isn't God likened to a *wall* somewhere in holy writ? The idea is a splendid emblem, to the brother, of the stability he has vowed. The closer he sticks to the wall, the stronger he grows (and the more effort will it take to dislodge him).

So he carries on with his “manual prayer”, and well taken to heart the model flowing from former reflections, he finds much inspiration, and consolation in the latter.

Wonderful stuff, ivy!

Holy Rule

I am no Latin scholar, but my friend Smith is. Between us, we are translating the Holy Rule. The fact is, I don't like translations, and even the present excellent translations leave me discontent. What's the old tag – *traditor traductor*? Every translation must lose something of its original force. Modern poets are stressing the importance of “evocation”. Just as a tune will irresistibly reawakened thoughts and feelings long since dead – “I'm a sucker for The Stars and Stripes”, says the hard-boiled newspaperman in *Mr Deeds*. “My old man died in Flanders” – so a word may have a

background in one language quite lost in translation. “Blitzkrieg” is not wrongly translated by “lightning war”, but where shall we find a word to conjure up the noise and the quake and terror that “blitz” means for us? When Hopkins writes, “I feel my finger and find thee”, the evocation of the Veni Creator and of the sense of seeking conveyed by “find” may possibly carry over into another language; but can any words but the actual ones supply “wring thy rebel dogged in den”? This is not an essay on words. I mention this truth of word-evocation as an apology for my discontent with even the very best translation. I believe it all started with the words “ira” and “iracundiae”. I have been quite happy to read in the “instruments” (chap. iv).

22. Not to give way to anger,

23. Not to harbour a desire for revenge,

until I noticed that St Benedict used the words “ira” and “iracundiae”. Now you don't need to know any Latin to see that there is possibly a connection between those two words. If there is such a connection, I thought, then possibly St Benedict meant it. If monks when reading the Holy Rule weigh every word, it is surely not fanciful to imagine that St Benedict did the same. I turned to that friend of my youth, Dr Smith, who I so neglected, and was delighted to find the following: “Ira denotes anger of a transient nature; iracundia denotes anger of an abiding nature.” We all have had the experience of not merely giving way to bad temper, here and now, but of nursing that bad temper till we get a chance to vent it. I looked up “reservare” iracundiae tempus non reservare) and found “to lay up”. I suddenly found a definite picture in my mind. It was confessedly fanciful. I saw a monk - it might have been me - who was furious with one of the brethren. He betrayed his anger all day long and his prior saw it. All day long the monk's face said, “just you wait”, and his prior saw it. Perhaps the prior tried to make peace and an external obedience was given; “dolum in corde” – deceit in the heart. Read the instruments from 22 to 34 and see for yourself whether it does not all fit into the picture. That final damning summing up of the whole affair, the root and source

of the whole rotten business – “non esse superbum”, I refuse to translate that. It says itself! Numquid ego, Domine?

**At Pluscarden Priory – Feast of the Assumption, 1949
To Our Lady of Scotland**

Here, for thy gathering, blooms afresh the flower
of Scotland’s faith: see, in this tranquil air,
its urgent beauty greets thee, hour by hour,
restored of love, reborn of Scotland’s prayer!

Mark it unfold for thee and multiply –
dear, indestructible, through age-long strife –
it’s fragrance rising heavenward with each sigh to thee,
our hope, our sweeteners, and our life!

Here on each breeze thy name steals, lingering,
to haunt these hills, as once, with melody...
ah, shrine, we pray, like joy’s celestial spring,
on this grey land too long bereft of thee!

Break through the gloom, that city, strath, and glen,
May hail thee, full of grace! For here, behold,
this day, from the deep peace Pluscarden,
Scotland salutes thee, Mary, as of old!

M.W.S.

The Prior's Lodging and the Watermill

Late mediaeval building at Pluscarden included the fine prior's lodging – a restoration of which appears above. James IV of Scotland, once on pilgrimage to the shrine of Tain, is known to have stayed overnight at the priory with a large retinue, and on this occasion his expense sheet included the item “drink-silver to masons working on the priory 15 shillings.” This argues a band of masons about 30 strong and it has been suggested to us, on very good authority, the building they were about then was that of our illustration above.