

It is with the evidence which provides us with the answers to these questions that the greater part of Mr Sandhurst's book is concerned. In arranging the verbatim extracts in logical order and linking them up with his own useful comments Mr Sandhurst has provided us with a most valuable addition to the vast literature of Lourdes and its cultus.

THOMAS HARPER

BARBE ACARIE: Wife and Mystic. By Lancelot C. Sheppard. (Burns Oates; 16s.)

Surprisingly little has been written about the fascinating Barbe Acarie. Yet who can portray her as she really was? Henri Brémond, lost in admiration, described her as 'de ces êtres achevés qui désespèrent les peintres'. For this remarkable woman, who lived the so-called *ordinary* life of a devoted wife and mother, was one of the outstanding religious figures of her day. Such men as Cardinal de Bérulle, Fr Coton, S.J., the King's confessor, Marillac the future Chancellor, St Francis de Sales, Ange de Joyeuse, and a host of others, prized her friendship, sought her advice, respected her and deferred to her continually; countless religious undertakings were planned at her house; and she herself, whose influence was so prodigious, was responsible for extensive monastic reforms, and is known to history as the 'true Mother and Foundress' of the Carmelite nuns in France.

Faced with such a life, the more timid of her biographers have hesitated: can a married woman be a great saint and mystic? . . . can an ordinary wife and mother do so much lasting good? And, hesitating, they missed the point, not realising that by their attitude, by falsifying the picture and painting her piously as a 'semi-nun' (contrary to evidence), they were unconsciously denying the sanctity of Christian marriage.

It is with gratitude, therefore, that we turn to Lancelot Sheppard's latest book, and to the masterly French biography by Fr Bruno, O.C.D., to find a true portrait of Barbe Acarie: a living portrait of one who was both 'wife and mystic', and who was to 'reach St Teresa's seventh mansion through the grace of the seventh sacrament'. 'Nowadays, her interest for us in this country', writes Mr Sheppard, 'is derived from the two great works of her life. She was a woman who achieved sanctity in marriage, who as a wife and mother of six children had to contend with difficulties greater than most, and who combined the role of Martha and Mary in a way that makes her life an example for all married women. Her other great work was the introduction of the Carmelite nuns to France.'

Mr Sheppard's fine study of these 'two great works' is written with insight and understanding; and his personal sympathy with Barbe Acarie and her husband, with the day-to-day problems of a home and

family, enriches the factual clarity of his style. His approach is thus essentially a human one; but it is also—and this must not be overlooked—the approach of an historian. The literary merits of the book must never make the reader forget the soundness of its historical structure which, when recording such a hotly disputed subject as Bérulle's dealings with the Carmelites, is of the utmost importance. The second half of the book is chiefly concerned with the coming of St Teresa's daughters to France and the subsequent developments, and it should appeal especially to the ever-growing number of people interested in Carmel. But in view of the criticism this part is likely to call forth, it is as well to stress here that Mr Sheppard is not writing as a 'controversialist'; he writes as an historian recording known facts; and when he proffers his personal opinion he does so after having studied a vast amount of material and, having weighed and sifted the evidence, he is in a position to give a balanced judgment. His conclusions, therefore, cannot be labelled 'prejudiced' and lightly dismissed. Is it too much to hope that all who are genuinely interested in the controversy will give these conclusions serious consideration?

The only real criticism concerns the dust-cover, not the book itself. An ethereal version of the frontispiece adorns the cover, and this suggests (contrary to the text) a very 'misty' conception of mysticism; also the last sentence of the blurb (though fully qualified in the Introduction to the book) is, as it stands, misleading.

One question alone remains. Readers who have long been familiar with the subject may find themselves asking: has Mr Sheppard over-simplified his picture of Barbe Acarie? Has he, by omitting many seemingly insignificant details, robbed her story of some of its poetry, lost some of that indefinable fragrance of the mystic consumed by the love of God?

Mr Sheppard has taken the line so often laid down in *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* that saints are men and women, not just 'holy souls'. He has given us a very practical and vivid account of Barbe Acarie, presenting her to us as she must have appeared to many of her contemporaries and—leaving to theologians the more detailed discussions of her mysticism—he describes what she did and achieved: thus making known the tree by describing its fruit. The biography is especially opportune at the present day on account of its bearing on such subjects as the lay apostolate and the possibilities of contemplative life in the world; and it is even more urgently opportune in its stress on the sacramental aspect of marriage.

Here, in an exceptionally well-produced book, is the story of a most attractive and saintly woman, one to whom countless Carmelite convents are indebted. Both the author and the publisher are to be congratulated upon their achievement.