

CENTURIES. By Thomas Traherne. (The Faith Press; 15s.)

Traherne (1637-1674) was the son of a Hereford shoemaker. He was educated at Oxford, presented to a living near Hereford, and died at Teddington as family chaplain to the Lord Keeper of the Seals. His poems and *Centuries* were forgotten until Bertram Dobell discovered them and published them, the poems in 1903 and a modernized version of *Centuries* in 1908. This is a re-issue of that text with a few corrections by the late H. M. Margoliouth, editor of the critical text of Traherne.

It is worth quoting the silliest sentence in the introduction by Hilda Vaughan, the wife of Charles Morgan, because it unintentionally helps us to see what value we can really put on Traherne's work (we are told by the blurb that many experts have compared *Centuries* favourably with the *Imitation of Christ*). 'Can he, perhaps, before birth', she asks, 'have reached so high an understanding of Absolute Good as All That Is, that it was unnecessary for him to experience, here on earth, the appalled, ghastly contemplation of its opposite, which most pilgrims who leave the plain path of piety and ethics have to endure at one stage or another along The Mystics' Way?' It is precisely this want of a felt sense of evil and suffering that disables Traherne's work—and shifts its centre far enough from orthodoxy to allow enthusiasts to speculate about this pre-natal 'intuition of being'.

Traherne was certainly a devout Anglican and something of a neoplatonist. But he never makes real to our eyes anything of the grace and loveliness of that moment in anglicanism which is so finely and fully embodied in the life and poetry of George Herbert. And on the other hand, Traherne's philosophy never displays the intellectual power of the Cambridge platonists with whom he is connected, nor is it ever integrated coherently with his piety to constitute a vision of the world as intense and distinguished as Henry Vaughan's. They share the same concern with the primal world of light which men can already begin to recover in this life by renewing the innocence of 'angell-infancy'. But Vaughan is at once far more painfully aware of human suffering and far more attentive and illuminating in his poetic explorations of human life. Traherne's failure to take the strain of human experience is not dissociated from the windy, hallucinatory pantheism which surely disqualifies his work from serious comparison with any spiritual classic.

*Centuries* is four 'centuries' of meditative notes, and a decade of a fifth, written for a small religious group in Herefordshire. They are Traherne's 'way to felicity', a buoyant and often beautiful vision of the world, but evidently not one that can be endorsed. We can read the third 'Century' particularly, to enjoy the prose and candour, but when we read that 'Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious

apprehensions of the world, than I when I was a child' we are reminded that Freud has confirmed St Augustine's grimmer view of infancy. It would be a pity never to read Traherne, but there were far finer writers and far more mature Christians in his time, and it is to them that we must turn (particularly to Vaughan and Herbert) to find testimonies that are *inspiring* as well as beautiful. Traherne's cult of infancy can be no inspiration for us now.

F.K.

## NOTICES

REDEMPTION THROUGH THE BLOOD OF JESUS. By Gaspar Lefebvre. O.S.B. (Newman Press, Maryland; xiv+233 pages; \$4.00.) According to the translator's preface, this book is 'evidently intended to be devotional rather than speculative in character', but at the same time it 'does present a rather complete theological view'. Unfortunately the author (and his translator) have not succeeded in freeing themselves from the technical terms and latinized vocabulary which make scholastic theology so unapproachable for the ordinary reader: so we have chapters entitled *The Material and Formal Objects of Devotion to the Precious Blood* and *God the First Efficient Cause of Our Redemption*. There are some very good things in this book—the author, who edited *The St Andrew Daily Missal*, is well versed in the Bible, the liturgy and the Fathers—but they might have been presented in a much more acceptable way.

PROBLEMS IN THEOLOGY, vol. 2 (The Commandments). By John Canon McCarthy. (Browne and Nolan, xiii+588 pages, 40s.) A classified collection of questions and answers about cases of conscience, from *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*.

Father Gerald Vann, O.P., has revised his very successful book *Morals Makyth Man*, which now appears as a paper-back entitled *MORALS AND MAN* (Fontana Books, 223 pages, 2s. 6d.). Like St Thomas, Father Gerald sees the moral life as comprising the whole movement of man's return to God. The first part of the book is concerned with the principles of moral action, the second with their application in social and political life. This cheap edition would make an excellent text for discussion in sixth forms and adult study-groups.

MORALS FOR LAY PEOPLE, by Silvester Birngruber (Scepter, 478 pages, 26s.), is more restricted in its scope, as the foreword indicates: 'Moral theology . . . is principally occupied with the determination of what is sinful'. Most of the book is devoted to this rather negative task of distinguishing what is sinful from what is not, clearly and in some detail,