

## RELUCTANT LEGEND

By Wilfrid Sheed

WHEN a pair of English Catholics decide to get married, one of the first questions to be settled is inevitably "Can we get Monsignor Knox to preach the sermon?" Only after that is it possible to discuss bridesmaids, flowers and how to keep Uncle George sober during the reception.

It is a curious fact that one of the world's deepest scholars should double as a last-minute marriage counselor for so many young Catholics. Monsignor Knox is best-known for his colossal, almost unique achievement of translating the whole Bible by himself—a task which might have broken the spirit of a whole university—and yet he still succeeds in being the happiest man at many a wedding feast, as well as the wisest.

Monsignor Knox probably holds the record for sanity among scholars. Just as he was the right man to translate the Bible (with his uncanny combination of erudition, concentration and style), so is he the right man at a wedding, or a funeral, or any great human occasion. He has the great pastoral gifts of compassion, sincerity and genuine spirituality; and he has also the social gifts of wit, good nature and taste, which make his presence a pleasure as well as a comfort.

In spite of his pre-eminence in both these fields (a collection of his wedding sermons will be coming out in the spring which will illustrate his excellence in that form), nobody would dream of calling Monsignor Knox a Bible-specialist, or a wedding-specialist. He is so completely equipped as a scholar and as a thinker, that his choice of activity can be dictated not by his capacities, but by the needs of the Church.

AT the moment, he is probably England's most popular Catholic preacher. He has assumed this position unobtrusively, without any of the usual devices of the spellbinder. Unlike many popular preachers, he doesn't wave his personality about, or try to ingratiate himself with his hearers. He would never dream of attempting to reduce a mob to hysteria in the name of Truth. And unlike many popular preachers, he would have no objection to being silenced. For there are many things he would rather do than preach and it is almost his misfortune that he does it so superlatively well that he has to go on with it.

Throughout the year he interrupts his intense work of Scripture commentary to travel to different parts of the country, wherever he is asked to go. His preaching method is restrained, but his voice is strong and vibrant, and at no point do you find your attention wandering. Every sermon is carefully constructed, so that it remains to be read afterward as a highly satisfying work of art. But more important, each sermon is packed with challenging ideas, absolutely new, so that one becomes suddenly aware of the presence and pressure of a really creative mind. It would be an assignment worthy of a Ph.D. thesis to try to find a single stale idea in Knox's sermons—or even a repetition.

AT least three times a year, Monsignor Knox descends on Oxford University for a sermon, and there he really seems to roll up his sleeves and enjoy himself. The University Catholic Church is invariably packed for him, and many people squash into the auditorium upstairs to hear him over the loud-speaker. Some of the best seats are taken by non-Catholic professors and dons, who are in search of intellectual entertainment: they are never disappointed. His university sermons, some of them collected in a book called *In Soft Garments* are a model of lightness and urbanity.

Oxford serves as a kind of holiday for Monsignor Knox. It was his spiritual home before Rome took its place, and he is still more at ease there than anywhere else. If he had remained an Anglican, he could have had a blissful life at Oxford; before he became a Catholic he was already a legend there, and he was well on his way to becoming a monument as well. But he had a special quality differentiating him from the other great wits and scholars which caused him to swerve off the foreordained track; and it is this quality, rather than his vast catalogue of attainments, that makes his story unique and important.

RONALD ARBUTHNOTT KNOX was born in 1888, son of the Anglican bishop of Manchester. His family was large (he was the sixth child) and, says Knox, remarkably happy and placid, not a good breeding-ground for rebels, or Catholics. In an interesting later essay on Bertrand Russell, Monsignor Knox defends the Victorian home against charges of repression and cruelty, and cites his own family as a fairly typical and kindly example.

At an early age, he began to exhibit uncommon brilliance. By the time he was twelve, he was writing flawless verse in Latin and Greek, and at eighteen he had a book of verse published (nothing unusual perhaps, except that the poems were in three languages). He was extremely contented at Eton and with reason: for he achieved the unusual double of winning all the prizes and being highly popular as well. Once again there is no sign, of the rebel, although his special private quality must have flashed for a minute when at the age of seventeen he knelt on the school stairs and made a vow of celibacy. He did it because he already felt by intuition that whatever his vocation was, he would have to pursue it alone.

At Oxford he seemed to blend even more perfectly with his surroundings. Again he won every prize in sight-no mean feat at Oxford- and in addition he became a star speaker at the Oxford Union debating society and altogether a university "character." He was a brilliant figure--almost a dandy according to rumor-and already people were attributing clever remarks to him which he hadn't made, a tribute which is only paid to well-established wits. He was the perfect Oxonian, practically the archetype; and if they had had a yearbook at Oxford, it would probably have predicted a brilliant future for him as a don, a politician or at least as a worldly archbishop.

After graduation, he went into the Anglican ministry and became the chaplain at Trinity, one of the Oxford colleges. In doing so, he entered his most purely brilliant phase: jests, limericks, parodies poured out of him, and for a while he was probably the most famous wit in England-a comical parson in the best English tradition. He was beginning to make his Anglican superiors nervous, because some of his fire was directed at them (e.g., his devastating parody *Reunion All Round*)-but the rest of the nation saw only the jester, and Knox began to be credited with every joke that was cracked by anyone in the British Isles. (Incidentally, this has been a life-long affliction.)

HE has written an account of his early life called *A Spiritual Aeneid* and in it we see that his serious spiritual adventures had begun long before his public realized it. Particularly, he was plagued by the absence of unity and authority among Protestants. But his conversion in 1917 came as a genuine shock to his admirers. Cardinal Newman's submission to Rome had been surprising enough-but then Newman had always been an unusual fellow, a kind of outsider. Knox was something else again. His Oxford associates thought of him as "one of us," a man they could really understand and trust. Only recently, I met a venerable scholar who was still lamenting the calamity of that poor fellow Knox-"such a brilliant chap before he got cracked on religion."

It is hard to estimate the revolutionary impact of this conversion on the Church in England. Knox brought with him unquestioned intellectual stature; and yet it was impossible to dismiss him as a brilliant crackpot with a grievance. If Knox wasn't sane nobody was. Directly, he was responsible for numerous converts including Sir Arnold Lunn, and to some extent G. K. Chesterton. Less directly he made countless young intellectuals and sophisticates realize that there was nothing shameful about being a Catholic. Since Knox joined the Church, in 1917, the number of Catholics at Oxford has been multiplied by five, and there have even been complaints that Catholicism has become an intellectual fad at the University. If this is true, it is undoubtedly Knox's doing. In addition, he was probably the most typical "Englishman" ever to go over to Rome; and he cleared the way for many other typical Englishmen to do likewise.

Ordained in 1919, Father Knox was appointed chaplain to the Catholics at Oxford in 1926. For thirteen years he served there, at once the glory and the support of the Catholic students. He supported the chaplaincy largely by the sale of fiendishly ingenious detective stories (later he wanted his great translation to be advertised as being by "the Author of *The Viaduct Murder*"). He also waged a running battle in print and over the radio against the bright and celebrated agnostics of the day. In fact believers began to lean almost too heavily on him; whenever a new heretic

was heard; they comforted themselves with the formula: "Ronnie can take care of him." During the twenties and thirties, it was a great comfort to have Knox on your side. In 1939 he retired to the country to start his solitary work on the Bible. Since then he has withdrawn more and more from public controversy, and concentrated his gifts on the simple exposition of doctrine and the spiritual life. Possibly this is a result of getting away from argumentative Oxford, or perhaps it comes from a feeling that the public is tired of controversy, and is more in need of spiritual nourishment.

HIS powers of exposition were tested to their fullest during the war-years, when a girls' school was evacuated into his area and he was assigned to preach there. At the time, he was working a six-day week among dictionaries and commentaries; but just as he is right for weddings so was he right for the schoolgirls. And his sermons to them were such models of simplicity-in-depth that they have since been put out as three highly successful adult-books: *The Mass*, *The Creed* and *The Gospel-all in Slow Motion*.

Knox's scholarship has always tended to make him more lucid instead of less so. His linguistic genius has given him a surprising mastery of colloquial English, and he is not above using slang if it helps his meaning. He is the opposite of the traditional woolly-minded professor. He is alarmingly alert in conversation, and his interests are far from being exclusively antiquarian or specialized. For instance his book *God and the Atom* came out while the rest of us were still too dazed to think about it. Indeed, he gives such an impression of being in touch with everything that it comes as a mild surprise to hear that he saw his first "talkie" only two years ago: *The Song of Bernadette*, liked it very much, but hasn't seen another one.

IT isn't easy to describe Monsignor Knox's presence. He has struggled hard to appear unobtrusive, with considerable success. He talks softly, and laughs a good deal, inwardly, so that you can only tell he is laughing by looking at him closely. He is medium in size, light in movement. The chief distinguishing feature, apart from the very interesting face with which nature has embarrassed him, is his collar, which always seems to be a size too large.

He has that reticence with strangers, which seems to be almost a disease among educated Englishmen. But unlike many shy people he gives not the slightest suggestion of arrogance, and you can feel at ease with him even if at first you can't talk easily with him. And once the ice is cracked, he is a superb conversationalist, and with the passage of time an excellent friend. Oddly enough, his shyness may even help other Englishmen to feel at home with him.

No one has ever achieved fame more reluctantly. A journalist looking for an interview and a few pictures would probably do better with Greta Garbo. Now that his Bible has finally appeared in one volume, his picture is on display in bookshops all over the country, and his name is already a household word over here as well as in England. It is a development that he views with distaste. At a dinner given for him by his friends last year, he pointed out hopefully that as nobody ever thought of Mortimer Pullman or the Earl of Sandwich in connection with their inventions, so too might Knox, the perpetrator of the Knox Bible, be forgotten.

There is a slim chance of this wish being granted. One-man translations of the Bible are extremely rare. No Catholic has attempted the task since St. Jerome, and nearly all the Protestant versions have been the work of several men. By itself it would be no mean life-work for a man to look back on; at any rate it would be enough for immortality. If you add it to all Monsignor Knox's other achievements-his incredible success in so many literary veins, his vital work for the Church-you have a greater load than anonymity will bear. In short, Monsignor Knox has become a reluctant legend, and thus he must remain.

But as pointed out earlier, the catalogue of achievements is not the main story. Knox's Catholic admirers have noticed a steady increase in spiritual profundity which has never been checked or diverted. He has never allowed his cleverness to handicap him or stunt his growth, although the temptations must have been many. His vocation has been in truth a lonely one, and many of his cleverest contemporaries have no real idea of what Knox has been up to these last forty years.

One reason for this growth is a natural humility that goes much deeper even than his modesty. Other people may be impressed by his worldly performances-he certainly isn't. Some years ago he wrote a letter to the late Caryl Houselander, in which he told her that her writings had convinced him more than ever of his own abysmal mediocrity and lack of spirituality. I don't know about your reaction to this, but it seems to me that if Monsignor Knox is mediocre, somebody will have to think up a new word to describe the rest of us.

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