

## WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL \*

WHAT is to be said of Westminster Cathedral? Is it a great building? Is it more than a big building? The almost universal verdict is in the affirmative. It is not petty. It is a work of genius.

Now, genius has been defined as the will and ability to "put the first thing first," and certainly Bentley did so at Westminster. Whatever others may have said, Bentley did not say: the first thing is to make a big Byzantine Church. The first thing he did was to envisage a great building suitable for Christian worship, and, again putting the first thing first, he did not say it shall rival Beauvais in height or Rheims in sculpture; he said: this great Christian Church shall be built of massive piers of brick spanned by vaults of concrete—these are the available materials, and I am not crying for the moon of medieval delight. He did not use such words, nor could he have used them. He was an old-fashioned English architect and was not aware of the social problem. He even dreamed of a building covered with a veneer of marble and mosaic! But though that was his dream, and even partly his achievement, he saw his church as a great building first and only second as a much adorned one.

This is obvious from the accomplished thing and is admitted even by those people who still, in this pagan age, hanker after pointed arches and pinnacles. Gothic! It is not a matter of points or cusps—it is a matter of adventure undertaken in the spirit of a crusade—an adventure with bricks and stones.. And in this spirit Bentley undertook the job at Westminster. As far as he was concerned, the job was as Gothic

\* *Westminster Cathedral and its Architect.* By W. de L'Hôpital. Two vols. Hutchinson and Co. £3 3s.

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as any Christian job will always be, but with Bentley the adventure began and ended, for in spite of all the enthusiasm of his assistants and admirers, in spite of his daughter's eulogy, Westminster Cathedral is, architecturally, nothing but the memorial of its designer's sense of greatness in mass and proportion and of the servility of the modern workman.

For Bentley was an old-fashioned architect—a designer—a builder only by proxy—a director of other men's work. And those other men—those hundreds of bricklayers and concrete mixers, those "architectural carvers" and marble workers—what were they? A set of tools, bought and sold, paid by the hour or week at a rate such as justice demanded or their trade unions could enforce—men degraded by a century of commercialism and four centuries of heresy and schism! They did the work, but not *their* work, nor even work for any church of theirs; and the result is what anyone should expect—a fine plan, noble proportions, accurate brickwork, scientifically mixed concrete and a whole conglomeration of elegant and scholarly but utterly dead carvings, capitals, mouldings, domes and finials in a more or less imitation Byzantine style. The outside of the building is almost entirely ruined by this absurd pandering to the appetite for ornamentation. The inside is only saved because it has been left unfinished and because the mists of London hide the mechanical quality of the workmanship.

Tons of concrete, millions of bricks, and an army of paid slaves led by a man of genius! If only Bentley had not been an old-fashioned architect and had realized that you cannot gather figs of thistles or expect to get works of art by making careful designs for mere tradesmen to execute—but then he would not have got the job; so we must be thankful for the great good of a noble plan and forget the evil of its

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dead stylistic ornamentation, however annoying we may find it.\*

Nevertheless, it is worth considering ; it is a vital matter this question of the architect and the builder, of the designer and the craftsman, and it is time we Catholics realized that the divine thing called Beauty is not to be bought or supplied by contract. It is time we realized that we are living in a pagan age and in a servile state. The modern workman is not an artist. He is a tool. Let us act on this fact and confine ourselves to plain building—well planned, well proportioned but plain—unadorned and undecorated. We cannot buy or measure worship ; let us confine ourselves to things that can be measured and paid for. A work of art is an act of worship—an act in which both maker and beholder take part as do priest and congregation at Mass (hence the liturgical and hieratic character of all the great religious arts—except in modern times—but then, modern art, except that of some of the so-called post-impressionists, is not religious at all—it is merely anecdotal). The great interior of Westminster Cathedral is Bentley's act of worship. We can worship with him.

We Catholics are amazingly ignorant of the artistic degradation caused by modern social conditions. We have got so accustomed to the entirely irreligious notion that labour has no responsibilities beyond being good and quiet and doing what it is told that it never occurs to us to expect a workman to have a sense of beauty or any right to use it. We do not see that the modern method of building with an architect and contractor is essentially evil. Yet it is exactly as if an artist should decide the type of child required and the upbringing of children be made a commercial

\* Apart from the bad marbles and mosaics, the only serious fault in the inside is the mad terra-cotta traceried windows under the domes.

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enterprise. A work of art is the product of love. How then can it be done to order and to a scale drawing ?

Mrs. de L'Hôpital has written a large book, copiously illustrated, about Westminster Cathedral and the numerous other works of her father, and, though the real genius of the man is certainly not over-praised—indeed, it is not made to stand out clearly at all—the book is so over-loaded with adulation of his many-sidedness as a mere designer, and so completely empty of any evidence, that either he or his daughter had or has the slightest acquaintance with the real business of artists, or the problem of the modern degradation of the arts, as to be almost worthless except as a record of the intrigues and worries incidental to the erection of a large church and as showing the kind of private life which an eminent architect leads and the high esteem in which a circle of more or less distinguished persons hold him.

It is true that Bentley is said to have desired that the work of decorating the Cathedral should be given to artists and not to "a firm," and it is true that this desire has, to some extent, been acted upon (we do not refer to the Stations of the Cross—they are furniture, not decorations), but there is no record whatever that Bentley made any objection to the employment of a firm for any work of construction. There is no evidence that he thought bricklaying was or might be an art or the bricklayer an artist. Indeed, why should he ? Bricklayers are not artists, nowadays, and through the whole of the Cathedral you may look in vain for even the smallest indication that so many as one among its thousand builders had the smallest conception of any value beyond that of his week's pay.

We are not blaming Bentley for this state of affairs, nor do we blame the builders. We are simply deplor-

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ing his inability to see the evil and their willingness to acquiesce in modern servile conditions of work. Mrs. de L'Hôpital's ignorance is also deplorable. She describes every stone of the Cathedral as though they were the stones of Chartres. She writes of the beauty and variety of the capitals and carved mouldings (even of those ridiculous ribands which vainly appear to hang up the portrait medallions at the West Door) as though twentieth century stone carvers could make things of beauty by copying an architect's designs! No doubt, Bentley was a great scholar and a man of great refinement, but the architectural adornment of Westminster Cathedral is dead and deadly and she does a great disservice to her father's memory, and to the cause of artistic and religious revival (the two are inseparable), by her unmeasured praise of the least valuable part of his work.

"The great things are the masterly structure . . . taste and learning are the least parts of Bentley's work. He had to supply them to justify himself to his employers and his epoch, but the merit of the Cathedral goes altogether beyond stylism." So writes Professor Lethaby in his short preface, and we are thankful that, in so elaborate and long-drawn-out a memoir as Mrs. de L'Hôpital has compiled, at least one piece of true criticism should appear and from so authoritative a source.

Westminster Cathedral is a great building. . . But it is great in spite of its designer's weakness as an architectural practitioner and in spite of the servile conditions of his employees. As a piece of brick and concrete work it is magnificent. In any other view it is scarcely less ridiculous than the Pavilion at Brighton or the Albert Memorial. The unadorned interior of Westminster, the Forth Bridge, the Nile Dam at Assouan—these are great and beautiful works. If we want more than these, if we want

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buildings of which every stone shall be evidence of the love of God, then we must regain our birth-right and make England again a Christian and a Catholic country.

We have said nothing of Bentley's other works—his few churches, his countless furnitures and fittings. But these do not count. In them he was an old-fashioned architect—an architect of superior knowledge and attainments it is true, a man of resource and energy, but such works are unimportant. It is by his Cathedral that he will be remembered, and for its bricks and concrete that he will be revered.

ERIC GILL.



## PRAYER

THOU knowest, O Lord, what sorrows I have borne,  
Thou knowest, O Lord,  
How all the spears of Grief, with one accord,  
This heart have torn.

Nought but a little truce, wherein to hoard  
More strength to dree  
The next wave of assault, I ask of Thee  
That knowest, O Lord.

*From the Italian of Vittoria Aganoor, (1855-1910).*

Trans. J. R. MEAGHER.

