

**Balancing the Books**

**At Home Abroad - II**

By Father John S. Kennedy

The reader of many books has been to Europe many times even though he may have never set foot there ("In my mind's eye, Horatio"). And for the reader of many books who has been to Europe many times, there are many places he knows from print without yet knowing them in fact.

In England, for example, I had never been to St. Mary's Church, Oxford where Newman, in his Anglican days, preached sermons of great consequence not only for his contemporaries but also for succeeding generations.

St. Mary's Church stood open to all comers, but few were going in. It proved to be larger and brighter than I had pictured. There are several separate seating areas, making it a difficult place to speak, or at least be heard, in, one would suppose. Newman's voice, I think I remember reading, was not especially strong, but it had a silvery timbre.

The visitor wishes he could hear that voice, see that figure, as he looks at the high wooden pulpit, oddly situated. Here the fluent, searching, often prophetic discourses were delivered to large, intent congregations. The unaffected beauty of the church, and its evidences, on every hand, of direct connection, age after age, with English life, make real the poignancy of Newman's painful parting from friends and from the past which held his roots.

Harold Nicolson and Victoria Sackville-West, husband and wife, now dead, were both of them writers, both of them gardeners. She was brought up in one of the noblest and most celebrated of countryhouses, Knole, near Sevenoaks, in Kent. She wrote of it in "Knole and the Sackvilles." Nicolson's diaries and letters, published in three volumes over the last few years, have countless references to Sissinghurst Castle, also in Kent, where they spent most of their married life.

Knole is approached by a narrow, serpentine road which coils and pitches through a thick wood and comes at last to the low hill on which the house grandly stands. Red deer graze on the grassy area fronting the house. House is it? Or walled town, self-contained and self-sufficient. At any rate, it is vast and has seven courtyards, 52 staircases, 365 rooms.

Documentary evidence shows that the house has existed since at least the 12th Century, being altered and expanded by one owner after another. It was acquired by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1456, and passed on to his successors. Henry VIII visited it, liked it, and summarily took it away from Archbishop Cranmer in 1538.

Henry's Protestant daughter, Elizabeth I, gave Knole to her cousin, Thomas Sackville, in 1566, and Sackvilles or Sackville-Wests have held it ever since.

Sissinghurst Castle was a ruin when the Nicolsons acquired it 40 years ago. Some small part of it they restored for their own occupancy. One sees their respective writing rooms, in which so many books and articles were composed. But they concentrated on the making of a garden and such a garden!

It is, rather, an acres-covering series of gardens, of all sorts and sizes, each distinctive. Flowers, trees, shrubs, vines both native and from far parts of the world, are here, in profusion, in brilliant combination and ingenious contrast. The planning, preparation, and cultivation of this floral wonder must have been prodigious, and so is the delight which it affords the stranger who strolls its paths.

In France, we visited Meaux, because of Bossuet, whose classical funeral orations were once a staple in French courses.

Jacques Benigne Bossuet was Bishop of Meaux from 1681 to 1704. His cathedral city, approached through the Brie cheese country, is now a bustling town, but the cathedral itself seems little visited. We were alone in the cold musty building. Or almost alone: a sparrow (not an eagle) flew familiarly about.

In the south aisle there is an unpretentious tablet memorializing the brilliant orator. But in the north aisle is his tomb, a repulsively and almost ridiculously ornate affair, grandiose and tortuous. Perhaps the maker intended to convey in stone something of the majesty of Bossuet's style. But his work, grey and dusty, now seems like a negative of Versailles, that stupefying creation of the king, Louis XIV, whom Bossuet served.

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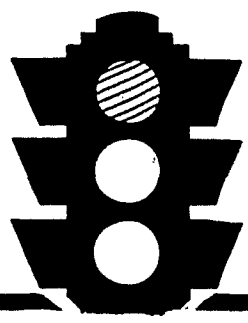
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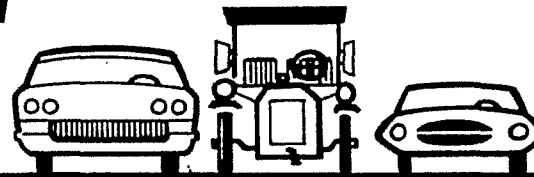
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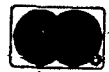
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