

John Henry Newman: A Portrait



In a speech after the opening of the library and hall at Keble College, Oxford, in April, 1878, W.E. Gladstone spoke of the Oxford Movement; having spoken of Pusey and Keble, he added: “but there is a name which, as an academical name, is greater than either of these – I mean the name of Dr Newman.” There were cheers, as Gladstone went on to compare Newman’s influence over the Oxford of the 1830s and early 1840s as “something without parallel in the academical history of Europe, unless you go back to the twelfth century or to the University of Paris”. These words of the great Victorian Prime Minister are included as a footnote to Newman’s letter of thanks, included in this superb selection.

One of the things which this reviewer takes away from his first reading of this selection of Newman’s letters – and it will certainly be the first of many rereadings – is how overwhelmingly important Oxford remained to Newman, from the moment of his arrival there until his death. The letters to his old Oxford friends, such as Mark Pattison, Dean Church and Pusey, are dotted as an affectionate, nostalgic chaplet, through all the Catholic years.

Newman himself once remarked to his sister Jemima that “a man’s life lies in his letters”. While some people are brilliant as conversationalists or as orators, there are others, as he said on another occasion, who “find their minds act best when they have a pen in their hands”. Newman’s incisive and glancing mind and his extraordinary personality are all on display in his letters. Does anyone since Augustine of Hippo combine such passion in religion with such a cerebral capacity to expound doctrine? Is any Victorian, objectively speaking – that is, speaking objectively of the sheer numbers he attracted – so attractive? Yet is any saint since Jerome more given to prickliness, taking offence, anger? An invitation from his sister Jemima to come and visit her in Derby and to meet his brother Frank, whom he had not seen for 30 years, calls forth an absolute stinker. It’s amazing their relationship recovered from it. (He refused to visit her on that occasion, and was never reconciled to either of his brothers – not to Frank, nicknamed “our blessed St Francis” by George Eliot, who became a sort of agnostic-Unitarian, nor to

Charles, an out and out unbeliever and a bit of a drunk, who lived in the pretty seaside town of Tenby in Pembrokeshire.

Yet, from his rise as the most charismatically attractive Oxford don in history, during the 1830s, to his death as a cardinal of the Roman Church in Hagley Road, Birmingham, in 1890, Newman remains an electrifying presence – in the world, and on the page. Having helped to transform the Church of England, he left it and began, subtly and unmistakably, to transform the great Western Church. His writings on the Fathers, on the development of doctrine, on the grounds of belief – in *An Essay in aid of a Grammar of Assent* – and on the fundamental basis of Catholic unity, were all profoundly influential, not on the First Vatican Council, whose deliberations he viewed from afar with something like horror – but on the Second.

Newman's letters form the largest part of his writings, and are made available to us after years of patient scholarship by the Birmingham Oratorian fathers and others. Way beyond the pockets of most of us, and too bulky for our bookshelves, they sit in libraries, stretching to 32 substantial volumes. Roderick Strange has performed the invaluable task of giving us a one-volume selection. The introduction, link passages and footnotes are punctilious, informative, genial and sympathetic. If there were readers who had never opened one of Newman's books before, and had never read his biography, they could not find a richer or more intoxicating introduction than this volume. For all his fastidiousness, prickliness, sheer cussedness, for all his egomania, we sense once again, in these pages, Newman's completely spellbinding charm. It is not just a charm of personality. It is the whole intellect which has put on Christ. Whether he is thinking about the fourth century church fathers, or his own reasons for submitting to the Roman Catholic claims; whether he is holding together his little band of faithful friends at Littlemore – before he was received – or whether he is engaged in founding the Oratory; whether he is starting the Catholic University of Dublin, or maintaining the Catholic school in Birmingham, or debating the establishment of the Oratory at Oxford, we see the same pattern at work. There is the capacity to inspire huge loyalty from his friends and to enchant – reading Newman is always an enchantment. There is also, however, in every changing scene of life, the curious ability to make enemies – of Faber, of Manning, of the Irish bishops – and to take offence. There is the ability to fashion all his experiences into silvery, unforgettable prose. There is the very strong vein of humour, which must have been a large part of the personal charm. I especially liked a letter to John Hungerford Pollen, thanking him for a Trollope novel (Fr Strange thinks it was *Barchester Towers*). Newman describes not only laughing aloud as he read it, but waking up in the night laughing. There is something very beguiling about that.

No one, to my mind, has ever written a biography of Newman which quite captures him. This book does so, however, in all his paradoxical greatness. Thank you, Mgr Strange.

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Roderick Strange, reviewed by A.N Wilson - The Tablet