

Two months ago, when I first arrived in this township just short of the border, I resolved to guard my eyes, and I could not think of going on with this piece of writing unless I were to explain how I came by that odd expression.

I got some of my schooling from a certain order of religious brothers, a band of men who dressed each in a black soutane with a bib of white celluloid at his throat. I learned by chance last year, and fifty years since I last saw anyone wearing such a thing, that the white bib was called a *rabat* and was a symbol of chastity. Among the few books that I brought here from the capital city is a large dictionary, but the word *rabat* is not listed in it. The word may well be French, given that the order of brothers was founded in France. In this remote district, I am even less inclined than I was in the suburbs of the capital city to seek out some or another obscure fact; here, near the border, I am even more inclined than of old to accept as well founded any supposition likely to complete a pattern in my mind and then to go on writing until I learn the meaning for me of such an image as that of the white patch which appeared just now against a black ground at the edge of my mind and will not be easily dislodged.

The school where the brothers taught was built in the grounds of what had been a two-storey mansion of

yellow sandstone in a street lined with plane-trees in an inner eastern suburb of the capital city. The mansion itself had been converted into the brothers' residence. On the ground floor of the former mansion, one of the rooms overlooking the return veranda was the chapel, which was used by the brothers for their daily Mass and prayers but was available also to us, their students.

In the language of that place and time, a student who called at the chapel for a few minutes was said to be paying a visit. The object of his visitation was said to be Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament or, more commonly, the Blessed Sacrament. We boys were urged by teachers and priests to pay frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament. It was implied that the personage denoted by that phrase would feel aggrieved or lonely if visitors were lacking. My class once heard from a religious brother one of a sort of story that was often told in order to promote our religious zeal. A non-Catholic of good will had asked a priest to explain the teachings of the Church in the matter of the Blessed Sacrament. The priest then explained how every disc of consecrated bread in every tabernacle in every Catholic church or chapel, even though it appeared to be mere bread, was in substance the body of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. The inquirer of good will then declared that if only he were able to believe this, he would spend every free moment in some or another Catholic church or chapel, in the presence of the divine manifestation.

In our school magazine every year, in his annual report to parents, our principal wrote at length about what he called the religious formation of us boys. In every

classroom, the first period of every day was given over to Christian Doctrine, or religion, as we more often called it. Students recited aloud together a short prayer before every period of the daily timetable. I believed that most of my classmates took their religion seriously, but I seldom heard any boy make any mention, outside the classroom, of anything to do with that religion. The chapel was out of sight of the playground, and so I was never aware of how many of my classmates paid visits there. However, I went through several periods of religious fervour during my schooldays, and during each such period I paid several visits daily to the Blessed Sacrament. Sometimes I saw one or another of my classmates in the chapel, kneeling as I knelt with head bowed or eyes fixed on the locked tabernacle, within which, and out of our sight, was the gold-plated ciborium filled with the white wafers that we thought of as the Blessed Sacrament. I was never satisfied with my attempts to pray or to contemplate, and I often wondered what exactly was taking place in the mind of my devout-seeming classmate. I would have liked to ask him what he seemed to see while he prayed; how he envisaged the divine or canonised personages that he addressed in his mind, and much else. Sometimes, by chance, a classmate and I would leave the chapel at the same time and would walk together along the return veranda and then through the brothers' garden towards the playground, but for me to have questioned the boy then about his devotions would have been hardly less disturbing than if I had made him an indecent proposition.

In the quiet street where I now live is a tiny church that I pass every weekday morning on my walk to the

shops and the post office. The church belongs to one of the Protestant denominations that I pitied as a schoolboy on account of the drabness of their services, which consisted, I supposed, of mere hymns and sermons and none of the splendid rituals enacted in my own church. Whenever I pass, the grass around my neighbourhood church is always neatly mown but the church itself is closed and deserted. I must have passed countless Protestant churches in suburbs or in country towns and scarcely glanced at them, and yet I can never pass the nearby church without my thoughts being led in surprising directions.

I have always believed myself to be indifferent to architecture. I hardly know what a gable is or a nave or a vault or a vestry. I would describe my neighbourhood church as a symmetrical building comprising three parts: a porch, a main part, and, at the furthest end from the street, a third part surely reserved for the minister before and after services. The walls are of stone painted – or is the correct term *rendered*? – a uniform creamy white. I am so unobservant of such details that I cannot recall, here at my desk, whether the pitched roofs of the porch and the main part are of slate or of iron. The rear part has an almost flat iron roof. The windows aren't of much interest to me, except for the two rectangular windows of clear glass, each with a drawn blind behind it, in the rear wall of the minister's room. The main part of the church has six small windows, three on each side. The glass in each of these windows is translucent. If I could inspect it from close at hand, the glass might well seem no different from the sort that I learned to call as a child *frosted* and saw often in bathroom windows. The glass in

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the six windows is by no means colourless, but I have not yet identified the shade or tint that distinguishes it. On some mornings when I pass, the glass in question seems an unexceptional grey-green or, perhaps, grey-blue. Once, however, when I happened to pass the church in the late afternoon, and when I looked over my shoulder at a window on the shaded, south-eastern side of the building, I saw the glass there coloured not directly by the setting sun but by a light that I was prevented from seeing: the glow within the locked church where the rays from the west had already been modified by the three windows on the side further from me. Even if I could have devised a name for the wavering richness that I saw then in that simple pane, I would have had to set about devising soon afterwards a different name for the subtly different tint in each of its two neighbouring panes, where the already muted light from one and the same sunset had been separately refracted. The porch has one window, which looks towards the street. This is the window that mostly takes my notice as I pass and may well have been the cause of my setting out to write these pages. The glass in this window is what I have always called stained glass and almost certainly comprises a representation of something – a pattern of leaves and stems and petals perhaps. I prefer not to draw attention to myself when I walk in the township, and I have not yet been bold enough to stop and stare at the porch window. I am unsure not only of what is depicted there but even of the colours of the different zones of glass, although I suppose they are red and green and yellow and blue or most of those. The outer door of the church is always closed when I pass,

and the door from the porch to the church is surely also closed. Since the tinted window faces north-east, the near side of the glass is always in bright daylight while the far side is opposed only to the subdued light of the enclosed porch. Anyone looking from my well-lit vantage point can only guess at the colours of the glass and the details of what they depict.

Perhaps thirty years ago, I read a review of a scholarly book in which part of the text comprised extracts from diaries kept by several men who travelled throughout England during the years of the Commonwealth smashing stained-glass windows. The men stood on ladders and used staves or axes to smash the glass. They reported in their diaries the names of each church that they visited and the numbers of windows that they smashed. They declared often in the diaries that they were doing the work of the Lord or promoting his glory. I have never travelled more than a day's journey by road or rail from my birthplace. Foreign countries exist for me as mental images, some of them vivid and detailed and many of them having originated while I was reading works of fiction. My image of England is of a mostly green topographical map, richly detailed but comparatively small for an image-country. While I was reading the review of the book mentioned, I wondered how any stained-glass windows could have been left in the country after the men mentioned had done their widespread work. I wondered too what had become of all the smashed glass. I supposed the men had attacked the windows from the outside – had rammed their staves and axes against the dull-seeming glass without knowing what it represented or even what were its colours as seen from

the other side. For how long were the coloured chunks and shards left to lie in the aisles and on the pews? Were the smashed pieces gathered up by the dismayed congregation and hidden against a time when they could be melted or otherwise turned again into images of revered personages in other-worldly settings? Did children carry off handfuls of many-coloured chips and afterwards squint through them at trees or sky or try to arrange them as they had formerly been or to guess whether this or that fragment had once represented part of a trailing robe, a radiant halo, an enraptured countenance?

According to the history taught to me as a child, the images in the smashed windows were expressions of the old faith of England. The glass designs had outlasted by a century the prayers and ceremonies and vestments that had been done away with during the Protestant Revolt, as we were taught to call it. If I had read during my school-days about the smashing of the glass, I might well have regretted the destruction of so many admirable images but I would have considered that the glassless windows were no less than the traitorous Protestants deserved. The empty window-spaces would have suggested to me the sightless eyes of a people blind to the truth. They had abolished coloured chasubles, gold monstrances, the Blessed Sacrament itself. Now let them sing and sermonise in black soutanes and white surplices and in the plain light of day, unstained by any glass of olden times. I would hardly have thought thus as I read during my adulthood about the smashers of windows, but my first sight of the window in the porch of my neighbourhood church caused me to feel a slight resentment that a Protestant sect founded not even

three centuries ago should ornament their simple place of worship in the style of the church that had lasted for nearly two millennia before the beginnings of their upstart faction. Even the surroundings of the small stone building made me somewhat resentful. No footpath leads past the church. Between the roadside kerb and the boundary of the churchyard, the ground is uneven beneath the mown grass. Not wanting to stop and stare as I pass, I have to learn what I can while fearing to turn an ankle.

What I learned a month ago from my first sight of the church I reported in an earlier paragraph. Until this morning, I had learned no more. I did not even know whether services were still held in the church. (The Anglican and the Lutheran churches, small weatherboard buildings, have each a notice outside showing the date and time of the next service. The weatherboard Catholic church was demolished a few months before I arrived here; the building had been infested with termites and was deemed unsafe.) This morning, I got ready for my first trip across the border. I was going to set out for a race-meeting in a town named for its closeness to the border. While the engine in my car was running, I went to open the front gate. A row of cars was parked in front of the church. Apparently, a service was being held. I can hardly explain even now why I did so, but I switched off the engine in my car and set out walking slowly towards the church as though I was taking a morning stroll. I counted the churchgoers' cars easily enough. There were seven. They were all large, late-model cars such as are owned by the farmers in the districts around this township. I surmised that each car had brought a middle-aged couple to church. Perhaps

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a few persons had walked to the church from houses in the township, but the congregation could hardly have numbered twenty. I heard no sound when I first strolled past the church, but on my way back I heard singing and the sound of a musical instrument. I had always supposed that the denomination whose church it was sang joyously, wholeheartedly. Admittedly, I was ten paces from the back porch, but the rear door of the church and the outer door of the porch had been left open on account of the heat, and yet the singing still sounded faintly and almost timidly. The voices of the congregation hardly rose above the sound of the imitation organ, or whatever they called the instrument accompanying them. I wrote *the voices of the congregation* just then, but they sounded to me to be all female voices. If the men were singing, they could not be heard outside the walls of the building.

I moved to this district near the border so that I could spend most of my time alone and so that I could live according to several rules that I had for long wanted to live by. I mentioned earlier that I guard my eyes. I do this so that I might be more alert to what appears at the edges of my range of vision; so that I might notice at once any sight so much in need of my inspection that one or more of its details seems to quiver or to be agitated until I have the illusion that I am being signalled to or winked at. Another rule requires me to record whatever sequences of images occur to me after I have turned my attention to the signalling or winking detail. I was preparing this morning to travel across the border but I put off my departure and went inside to my desk and made notes for what is reported at length in the paragraphs hereabout.

During one of the last years of the 1940s, I was taken by my parents on many a Sunday to a small timber church in the south-western district of this state. At each side of the church were two long timber poles. One end of each pole was fixed in the ground; the other end rested firmly against the upper wall of the church. I assumed that the poles kept the church from leaning or even toppling. The building thus kept upright comprised a tiny porch; a main part with a railed-off sanctuary and perhaps twelve pews divided by a central aisle; and a small room for the use of a priest. The congregation of the church comprised mostly farmers and their families. A custom was followed in that church such as I never observed in any other. In the timber church with the four poles, the pews on the left, or the gospel side, were occupied only by male persons while the pews on the right, or the epistle side, were occupied only by females. I never saw anyone violate this strict segregation. Once, two newcomers, a young husband and wife, went in early and sat together on the men's side. The church was not even half full before the wife understood her mistake. She hurried across the aisle, blushing, and joined the other women and the girls.

Many years later, while I was reading a magazine article about the Christian sect known as the Shakers, an image formed in my mind of a group of adult worshippers in a small timber building hardly different from the church mentioned in the previous paragraph. It was mostly an incongruous image, lit by the sunlight of a summer morning in southern Australia. The male worshippers wore dark suits and wide neckties, and their faces and necks and hands and wrists were red-brown. The females wore