

WHAT GALLANT BELGIUM OWES TO THE BENEDICTINES

When the German invasion closed the University of Louvain the professors of this historic institution were driven to many quarters of the globe. They found shelter and occupation in various universities of other countries, particularly in the United States. One of these scholars, Leon Van Der Essen, Ph.D., LL.D., Professor of History at the University of Louvain and member of the Royal Academy of Archaeology of Belgium, went to Chicago and for a while conducted a series of lectures at the Chicago University. While there he noticed how few were the histories of his country published in the English tongue. So he set himself to the task of preparing such a history. The volume has since been published.

Professor Van Der Essen treats of the whole of Belgium's history, starting with the Roman invasion up to, though not including, the present struggle. A remarkable characteristic of the work is the cool, dispassionate even sympathetic manner in which the author treats all persons and people whose hands helped to mould Belgium's past, whether to her joy or sorrow. Particularly notable is the manner in which he speaks of the work of the monks and monasteries and the influence they had upon the land. Belgium owes its civilisation entirely to the efforts of the monks, the Benedictines. This the author asserts boldly in the following paragraph:—

"If the conversion to the Catholic faith was mainly the task of the missionaries, the introduction of civilisation was mainly the task of the monasteries. Here the Benedictine monks played a very large part, both as civilisers and colonisers. Their monasteries were, from the sixth century on, centres of economic and intellectual life. Whilst some of their monks attacked the thick forests of southern and central Belgium with axes, others engaged in literary labors in the monasteries' libraries, transcribing the ancient Greek and Latin manuscripts, composing hymns and lives of saints, and opening schools for the education of the people. They planted in the very hearts of the people the roots of that strong religious spirit, which has steadily developed and which has become one of the characteristics of the national spirit of Belgium.

"Each monastery became a kind of model farm, where the population of the neighborhood could learn the best agricultural methods. In the monastery, too, they could find physicians who knew how to take care of the sick. The monastery, being protected by the respect that was inspired by the saint to whom it was dedicated, was also a place of safety in time of danger. Consequently dwellings became more and more numerous around the monasteries, and villages developed under their influence and protection.

"It is not, then, surprising that in the course of time, tales and legends developed wherein the founders of those monasteries became the heroes of poetical and sometimes extraordinary adventures. In this manner did the people of mediæval times express their gratitude for all they owed to those early pioneers of culture and civilisation."

"Feudal times have a harsh ring in our ears. Still even those times found in the monasteries a redeeming institution. The monks were active in preaching the Church's message of peace in a time when war and

murder were the popular pastimes. Their preaching was not without effect. To this the professor testifies in the following passages:—

"Belgium became a country of monasteries in the eleventh century, and ever since that time the people have shown that deep religious spirit that is one of the distinctive traits of the national character. The monks exerted a very strong influence on the minds of the rough feudalists, who thought mainly of war and robbery; one of the most powerful dukes of Lothringen, Godefrid the Bearded, desired to be buried in the dress of a monk. The robber-knights, pursuing an enemy or a convoy of merchants, thought only of plunder; once in sight of the walls of a monastery, however, they would cease their pursuit and turn back. Carrying through the country the relics of their saints, the monks would often succeed in stopping private wars and murder. An example of the religious spirit is the great 'procession' of Tournai, that attracted every year thousands of pilgrims and visitors, Flemish and Walloon together, and that acted as a unifying factor to both races of Belgium."

If Belgium was in the days before the present war a fertile and prosperous country, then that is owing in a great measure to the monks of the middle ages who cleared the lands of the forests and for the first time turned up their rich soil with the ploughshare.

"Hitherto only one monastic Order had influenced religious life in Belgium—namely, the Benedictines. In the twelfth century other Orders were born—the Cistercians and the Norbertines or Premontres. The Cistercians, founded by St. Bernard in France, played the part, mainly, of clearers of wild land and colonisers; they introduced new economic and agricultural methods and exerted a deep influence in economic life.

HIS GRAVE.

(For the *N.Z. Tablet*.)

I know not where they laid you when you fell;
But somewhere, somewhere far on Flanders field
A white cross gleams above a mound to tell
Your sacrifice; the wild flowers are your shield;
Above your head is song and blush of spring.
The kind wind breathes upon your hallowed clay
A prayer by night—a memory by day,
And round your cross these wistful yearnings cling.
I know that you have found eternal rest,
And that full joy—the crown of brightest worth.
You walk the golden mansions of the blest,
But I feel still the cold cerements of Earth
That fold about your heart—and that sad pain
That lingers o'er your grave on Flanders plain.
"Cylas."

Christchurch.

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