

A.R. Baker, ed., *Martin Crossley Evans, Selected writings and tributes*, The Bristol Masonic Society 2022, hardback 364pp, numerous illustrations, some colour. [ISBN 978-1-7396787-0-8].

The editor's foreword observes that 'Martin Crossley Evans had kept almost every piece of paper that had ever passed through his hands.' So this collection, of some 60 pieces by MJCE himself, plus half a dozen tributes by others, is necessarily selective. Omitted, for example, are articles MJCE wrote for this Society's *Transactions*, and his short stories, which MJCE wished to remain unpublished.

The editor has grouped the pieces under a dozen or so headings: MJCE's family and family history; funeral addresses (including one for our Society's former President the late Dr Basil Cottle) and obituaries; pieces about Gresham's School, Holt, where MJCE taught history and divinity from 1979 to 1982; papers read to Bristol's Portfolio Society, a literary club founded in 1868; pieces about Bristol University, where MJCE was a warden of halls of residence, mainly Manor Hall, from 1984 to 2018; masonic addresses; sermons and religious talks; personal notes and reflections, including the newsletters he enclosed with the many Christmas cards he sent; pieces about Dickens, Bristol history, and murder; and a life of the seventeenth century plague doctor Thomas Witherley. The book concludes with six tributes by others. The text is interspersed with photographs of MJCE at various stages of his life. One is a wide-angle shot of the chaotic clutter of his room in Goldney Hall, to which MJCE was removed while Manor Hall was undergoing building works. Many of the photographs are in colour, and taken by Olivier Burnside, whose portrait drawings of MJCE catch his likeness skilfully.

The pieces by MJCE illustrate his talents as a writer: lucidity, apt choice of words, narrative skill, and an entertaining style. Only in a rant against Oscar Wilde, an imaginative account of the death of Jezebel (2 Kings 9, 30-37), and religious (churchy?) diatribes, is the style hyper-Dickensian. The historical and biographical pieces reflect assiduous research. They are factual and narrative, unfogged by abstraction, analysis or theory. They are full of meticulous detail; in one piece MJCE notes that 'precis will have never been one of my strengths.' The range of subjects is wide: family and Cheshire history; essays and fiction, European and oriental as well as English, up to the end of the nineteenth century; biblical exposition; personal reminiscences; religion; church affairs; university life; gardens (especially flowers); the landscapes and flora of the Lake District. There are references to music (mainly Bach, Mozart, Brahms and Gilbert and Sullivan) and drama. Absent are references to anything scientific (except for geology), mathematical, or modern.

Those who wish MJCE to be remembered as the epitome of an educated, cultured, Christian gentleman, hospitable, cultivating and maintaining friendships, old-fashioned, Pickwickian, enamoured of the past, resistant to change, hostile to modernity, conservative and Conservative, but without the nastiness exhibited by some sections of that party, and solicitous for the welfare of the students, particularly those from overseas, in his halls of residence, will find much here to corroborate that view.

Beneath that surface, however, many of the pieces disclose a deeply unhappy man, beset by melancholy, guilt, frustration and physical ailments. What follows derives not from any personal knowledge of the reviewer but from statements in, and inferences from, pieces in the book. The causes of that private misery may have been deep: he adored his grandmother, loved his mother, but as a child and adolescent hated and feared his father. The extreme language in pieces about Oscar Wilde, Jezebel, and what he called fallen women would be amusing if they were not also disturbing. He expresses deep regrets about his celibacy, which he claimed to be not of his choosing. He was relaxed about others' shortcomings, but not when it came to sexual morality.

Several pieces show MJCE to have been abnormally interested in death, and fascinated by dead bodies. Of the Christian festivals the most important one to him was Easter; not the resurrection, but the crucifixion. There may have been a hereditary influence: one piece recounts with empathy and admiration, but with searing frankness, a cousin's life and eventually successful suicide attempts.

Religious conflicts may have contributed to MJCE's melancholy. Though an early childhood experience convinced him that God existed and loved him, and though a staunch member of the Church of England and an upholder of pre-modern aspects of the traditional establishment, MJCE was theologically an Arian, unable to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was God, a position indistinguishable from that of late nineteenth century Unitarians. For a conservative evangelical embedded in conventional Anglicanism, that must have contributed to his internal conflicts. Another possible source of mental and emotional conflict was the geology he was taught as an undergraduate: following Bishop Ussher's chronology, and believing, notwithstanding his historical training, that the Bible, or at any rate the Hebrew Old Testament, was the word of God (2 Timothy 3.15-17), MJCE could not accept the concept of deep time.

Physical illnesses added to his misery. MJCE suffered from medical conditions, one of which led to increasingly frequent and lengthy periods in hospital to have his lungs and other bodily cavities drained of fluid. In an alarming piece entitled 'A reflection upon my personal hell,' dated 2006, and headed with the opening words of Psalm 130 (but not translated as *De profundis*, perhaps because of its Wildean associations) he refers to fluid-filled lungs and expresses a wish to relinquish his 'despairing hold on life,' a sentiment at odds with moral teachings propounded by his church. MJCE was to live for another 16 years. It is not surprising that many of his personal and autobiographical reminiscences are imbued with self-pity, for which it may be inappropriate to judge him too harshly.

That he lived with, lived in spite of, and to all external appearances overcame these afflictions, MJCE would no doubt have attributed to divine support, or to the stoicism he drew from reading translations of Cicero and Marcus Aurelius. Whether it was the hand of God or MJCE's own well-laced bootstraps that helped him survive, his achievements are all the more impressive, and the book is a worthy, if unsettling and disturbing, tribute.

At the request of the book's editor, the review copy will be placed in the Society's library.

WILLIAM EVANS