

## COLIN A. RUSSELL

### Guest Editorial

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*This issue marks the retirement of Dr Brian Robins as Reviews Editor of the journal since its inception in 1989. We are very grateful to Dr Robins for his hard work in carrying out this task. We also welcome the new Reviews Editor Dr Lawrence Osborn. Professor Colin Russell, President of Christians in Science, was invited to provide the following Editorial to mark this transition.*

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#### On Book Reviews

From the beginning this journal has devoted a good deal of space to book reviews. People's reactions to them vary enormously. For some they are the first items to be read, possibly because they are short, relatively undemanding and it is often fun to see what others make of a book one has just waded through oneself. Other people regard them as an inferior form of literature, unworthy of a mind that can grapple with the weighty issues discussed in the main papers but perhaps appropriate for the odd spare moment or even as a soporific night-cap.

Judging by the animated discussions at the Editorial Committee meetings of *Science and Christian Belief* reviews are certainly not the 'poor relation' of the mainstream papers, but an essential part of our service to readers. And this surely goes for any learned journal that bothers to print reviews at all. They can inform us of work going on in fields adjacent to our own, or in more remote areas. They can tell us what old Professor X is up to these days or what novelties young Dr. Y is about to spring upon the scholarly world. They can give a shrewd evaluation of contentious work within a different perspective from that of the author. Above all they can be of immense help in assessing what to buy or borrow and what to leave, or what to recommend to one's institutional or local librarian. What they can't do, of course, is provide a substitute for reading the book itself (though a useful conversation stopper is sometimes 'I've not read the book, but I have seen the reviews . . .').

If all or any of these good things are to happen there are certain conditions to fulfil. First of all, the review must be *relatively recent*. We can't all keep to the deadlines imposed by *Nature* or the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, where some books are only a few weeks old when reviewed. But neither should we ape those lesser journals which could well entitle some of their pages 'Reviews of remaindered books'. This is particularly important when subjects change rapidly, and anything involving science must come into that category. Promptitude depends on publishers, review editors and above all on reviewers. I write the latter with an acute pang of conscience for I have myself a review in hand for another journal that is now several weeks late. Inexcusable!

Related to the need for speed is the complementary virtue of being *thorough*. Under pressure of time it is all too easy to skim through a book and give a bland and superficial impression. Recently I picked up a review copy of a volume and was mildly shocked to discover that it had apparently not been opened. One is reminded of those (hopefully apocryphal) stories of external examiners who first read theses on the train journey to the examination, or of the remark attributed to Sydney Smith that he never read a book *before* reviewing it,—‘it prejudices a man so’. The point is that ‘doing a book review’ is not primarily a quick way for getting into print, a cost-free way of acquiring a desirable volume or a trifling exercise in publication. To be worth while it has to be as thorough as possible, and that takes time and effort.

Thirdly, a review has got to be *informative*. We all know what it is to discover a long-awaited book notice to be merely a vehicle for the reviewer’s opinions with little indication as to what the volume is actually about. It may be an ego-trip for the writer but it is precious little use for the reader. Glancing back over back numbers of this journal I was relieved to discover hardly a trace of this objectionable practice. But I did find a number of examples of its polar opposite: a purely factual summary of a book with hardly any evaluation of its contents. Which suggests a fourth criterion for reviewers to bear in mind.

A good review must be *critical*. Everyone knows that opinions are only those of the writer and makes allowances accordingly. But we need to know whether at least one person found the book easy to read, its arguments clearly presented and its conclusions judiciously weighed. Does the author write with integrity and fairness, where does his/her work fit into the wider field of the subject, is it a truly path-breaking work or a mere rehash of existing material (or somewhere in between)? Why, in short, should anyone bother to read it? Nor should criticism stop short of such mundane features as clearly presented pages, provision of a good index and bibliography, and whether it is inordinately expensive. Quite recently I was vastly amused to see a review in another journal of one of my own books. Instead of giving any opinion as to its merits or otherwise, the review consisted solely and entirely of a rather ponderous summary of the contents, occupying many column-inches. Its sole concession to even the existence of the volume was a throwaway remark that much of what the reviewer had penned could also be found ‘in this book’. Conceivably he found it so awful that he was constrained by the laws of libel, or (much less likely) it might have been beyond praise! But some critical evaluation, positive or negative, would surely have been welcomed by readers of that periodical. And the same is even more true of subjects like science-and-religion where almost nothing can be written that avoids controversy, where the sheer literary quality can vary so much and where the academic level can be anywhere from the extremely popular to the seriously learned. So my plea is to all our reviewers: please tread the middle road between these extremes; by all means convey succinctly what a book is about but also tell us whether or not you think we should read it, indicating your reasons as clearly as possible.

Finally it almost goes without saying that a review must be *temperate*. To

love our neighbours as ourselves must at least imply that we avoid the personal attack and (as far as in us lies) strive for scrupulous fairness, even to views that we detest. Let us not give authors cause to lament in the manner of a Darwin. He had been goaded by a manifestly unfair notice in the *Edinburgh Review* (anonymous but by Richard Owen) of *The Origin of Species*. May no author have to say of one of our reviewers: 'It is painful to be hated in the intense degree with which he hates me' and 'I wish for auld lang syne's sake he had been a little less bitter'! Orthodoxy does not have to be vitriolic.

Nor, on the other hand, need eulogy stretch quite as far as this:

It may be justly said that so many and so valuable philosophical truths, as are herein discovered and put past dispute, were never yet owing to the capacity and industry of any one man.

But then the author was Isaac Newton and the book *Principia*.

Of course one of the hardest tasks for any reviews editor is to get the best people to write. These are certainly not the sort described by Coleridge:

Reviewers are usually people who would have been poets, historians, biographers etc. if they could; they have tried their talents at one or the other, and have failed; therefore they turn critics.

In fact the best reviewers are invariably busy people and usually need gentle persuasion to take on yet another chore. However it is not fair to reader, author or reviewer to solicit reviews from folk without the relevant experience and expertise, and a Reviews Editor needs uncommon wisdom and grace. Much gratitude is due to Brian Robins who held that post until this year and who established the reviews section as an integral part of *Science and Christian Belief*. By now he must have an enviable network of contacts with the leading publishers! To the new Reviews Editor, Lawrence Osborn, and to his expanding team of reviewers, go our best wishes for continuing and accelerating the noble task.