

A DISCONCERTING LIBERAL

A review of "God's Irregular: Arthur Shearly Cripps, A Rhodesian Epic," by Douglas V. Steere (London, S.P.C.K., 1973)

by Edgar Brookes

Joyce Burger (Lloyd George) in Bernard Shaw's "Back to Methusaleh" rejoices over the day when "the village atheist and the Salvation Army Captain will go to the polls arm in arm" to vote for the Liberal Party. There have been worse descriptions of South African Liberalism. Men of other religions and no religion have gone arm in arm with devout Christians to Liberal meetings. Dr. Douglas Steere, who recently gave the Maurice Webb Memorial Lectures in Natal, has published a book on one of the devout Christians who have supported radical race policies. Arthur Shearly Cripps, a convinced (though very ecumenical) Anglo-Catholic, was also a poet of considerable worth. It is perhaps not high praise to say that he remains the best Rhodesian poet, for Rhodesia has not had many. We can pay him a higher compliment by saying that George Herbert, Crashaw and Vaughan would have welcomed him as a man and a brother.

One Sunday evening Arthur Shearly Cripps arrived to take Evensong at Enkeldoorn, wearing a surplice over his torn khakis, but no cassock. On the way, walking as he almost always did, he had met an African who had no blanket, so he had given his cassock away. He lived among the Africans and to a large extent followed their diet. He loved them and they loved him. Dr. Steere, visiting the Chapel where he is buried, found fresh flowers on his grave, put there by African hands twenty years after his death.

To ease the land situation for his people, he bought two farms on which to settle them, and remained on the edge of insolvency ever afterwards. True stories like this could be multiplied. But lest it should be thought that he confined himself to giving practical assistance to a few, it might be well to look at his epic struggle against the Land Apportionment legislation of Rhodesia. These unjust proposals he fought from 1917 to the end of 1920. He wrote a booklet "A Million Acres" to the great disgust of the British South Africa Company's Resident Administrator in Salisbury. He co-operated with Sir John Harris of the Aborigines' Protection Society. He prepared an impressive fifteen page appeal "To the Crown" addressed to the British High Commissioner in Cape Town. He saw the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Milner and the future Lord Halifax. He fought his own Bishop. But his own District Commissioner, who knew the facts, supported him, and so did the Chief Native Commissioner.

The end, as has unfortunately too often been the case in Liberal agitations, was superficially a failure. But of this Dr. Steere says:

"When on 12th November 1920, the Order in Council implementing the Imperial Nature Reserve Commission's recommendation finally appeared there was, to be sure, no restoration of the million plus acres which Cripps and Harris and John White had struggled for. But the results were not lacking in consequences. Most important of all, they had by their vigilant action delayed the Order in Council for three years; had made possible an extended debate; and had permitted the people of Britain to become acquainted with the issue involved in the Africans' need of land in Southern Rhodesia. While the Sabi Reserve shrinkage was not officially altered, the railway and the twelve-mile strip proposal was quietly abandoned . . . There were serious adjustments made in the reserve strips in the north-east bordering Portuguese territory, and in several other regions, as a result of the lively debate which had been stimulated. Finally it should be noted that enough sentiment on the land issue for Africans had been roused to open the way in the decade which followed for the adoption of a vast, if ultimately questionable, Native Purchase Area programme."

As the years went by the courage and integrity of Cripps won him much friendship and support. He often spent the night in a Resident Commissioner's house, for "after all", as Steere says, "he was a Trinity College man and a man of letters and a priest of the Church of England — even if he had 'gone native' in a curious sort of way and could be counted on for an opinion biased in the Africans' favour." In his last years he was fortunate in finding an Archbishop who understood and supported him — the late Edward Paget. When he refused to apply for a Licence from the Bishop and committed other serious ecclesiastical irregularities, Archbishop Paget "shook his head and laughed and said, 'I think I know a saint when I see one, and let him alone!'"

Cripps was a modern Francis of Assisi, as witness the following paragraph: "A fellow passenger in steerage was in such desperate need of a decent suit of clothing that Cripps had given him the one he had been wearing, and, to his mother's consternation he arrived at Stoodley Knowle in Torquay, not only carrying, as always, his mealie sack and a biscuit tin tied up with a cord, but on this occasion he wore simply his mackintosh on top of his trousers and shirt. 'Arthur is quite mad,' was the household word."

Yes, he was, like St. Francis, God's madman, and such men are needed for our cause. Let us whose liberalism is more conventional and respectable, accept and honour him and other madmen for the Cause. They are needed and so are we. We need waste no time in criticising one another. □