

Book of the month

Ian McCormack is inspired by a new edition of the life of a twentieth century prophet.

THE LIFE OF RAYMOND RAYNES

Second edition

Nicholas Mosley

American Church Union, 335pp, pbk

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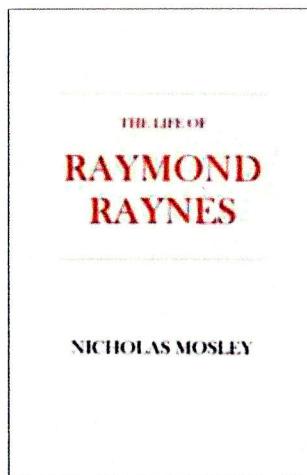
The Life of Raymond Raynes is one of the classic spiritual biographies of the twentieth century. Frequently romantic in tone and style, occasionally sentimental, it tells the story of the life of a man who, in the words of Nicholas Mosley, one 'either had to listen to or deny; one could not ignore him'.

Mosley writes with style, and his subject is an intriguing one, so that at times the book reads almost like a thriller. At other times, particularly when Raynes is being directly quoted, it reads like what it is: a powerful Christian biography.

No doubt this is due in large measure to the fact that these were, on the surface at least, glory years for the Community of the Resurrection (CR), which Raynes joined as a novice in 1930, and of which he was the Superior from 1943 to 1958. The success or health of a Religious Community should never be judged or determined solely by its external works and apparent prestige, but during Raynes' lifetime CR undertook the pioneering work in South Africa for which it is still best known by many people; saw a record number of professions; and enjoyed a status of prestige within parts of the Church of England, especially the catholic wing, which it seldom enjoyed before or since. This exalted position gave Raynes his chance to shine, but it was a position which was in no small part thanks to him in the first place.

This was particularly true of CR's work in South Africa. CR first arrived there in 1902, and the Community became known for its Christian witness against the evils of apartheid most especially during the years that Trevor Huddleston was working there from 1943 until his recall in 1955. But it was during the years that Raymond Raynes was in charge at Sophiatown, Johannesburg, from 1932 until 1943, that the work of the Community there flourished and grew to unprecedented proportions. It was Raynes that oversaw, and in fact was personally responsible for, the building of schools and churches for black South Africans at a rate previously unseen. It was Raynes who took the fight for better living conditions to the city authorities with a directness and a passion which had not been seen before. It was Raynes who laid the foundations, literally and metaphorically, for the heroic work of Huddleston in subsequent years.

But as well as continuity, there was a subtle difference between the work of the two Mirfield Fathers. They were faced with different problems: Raynes with the *de facto*



but ill-defined existence of inequality and oppression towards black South Africans; Huddleston with the dogmatic and systematic policy of Apartheid initiated by the Nationalist government that came to power in 1948.

Faced with this deliberate policy of racism, Huddleston became politicised and political in a way that Raynes had never been, to the extent that

Huddleston's personal safety was endangered. Eventually this led to the hugely controversial decision, taken by Raynes as the Superior of CR, to recall Huddleston to Mirfield. The decision remains controversial, but the passage of time and the advantage of historical perspective lends support to Mosley's contention that the decision was the right one. And in making it, Raynes was consistent. More than once Mosley quotes Raynes insisting that Christians cannot create a blueprint for society. What they can do is show society the perfect man; and follow in his footsteps by doing what is right at every opportunity available to them.

Given the vibrancy, the urgency, and the controversy of CR's work in South Africa during these years, it is perhaps no surprise that these are the best bits of Mosley's book. But that is not to say that the rest is uninspiring. The descriptions of life at Mirfield, of missions in places as diverse as Solihull and Denver, of the effect that Raynes had on people who met him and recognised the presence of holiness within him, are every bit as poetic as the sweeping stories of Africa and Raynes' work there.

And Mosley does indeed insist that to encounter Raynes was to encounter holiness. He says in his preface that Raynes' great authority did not seem to come from his own personality, but from a transparency to something beyond him. Such authority is the hallmark of a prophet, and Mosley offers much in his text to substantiate the claim that that is precisely what Raynes was.

The *Life of Raymond Raynes* is like a Victorian biography in style, with Raynes' writings interspersed chronologically within the biographical material. There are no footnotes, but some of the more substantial quotations are noted at the end of the book. This new edition, published by the American Church Union, differs little from the original. It is handsomely produced, though the photographs are sadly poor reproductions of the plates in the original. Christine Sunderland prepared the new edition for publication and provides a new preface; Nicolas Stebbing CR supplies a new afterword. For him as a young man, Mosley's book was a great inspiration, just as it was for me. Read this new edition, and be inspired yourself. **ND**