

THE SCOTSMAN
EDINBURGH, MIDLOTHIAN, SCOTLAND
27 DECEMBER 1951
(page 7)

BOOKS OF THE DAY

Aleister Crowley

The Great Beast. By John Symonds. (21s. Rider.)

Aleister Crowley. By Charles Richard Cammell. (152. Richards Press.)

Swordfish and Stromboli. By Denis Clark (15s. Jarrolds.)

Of all the legendary figures thrown up by the present century, none surely has equaled Aleister Crowley in utter contempt for social behaviour as most people know it, and in the extravagances of a private cult as few have had the initiative or stamina to practice it. Crowley reaped the harvest of his eccentricity in full measure. He was commonly regarded as a symbol of infamy, the archpriest of strange obscene rites. Four years after his death biographies take a hand in assessing his judgment of himself as a man of purity wearing a mask of vileness.

Mr. Symonds, Crowley's literary executor, with access to his private papers and journals, has written a book likely to engross the student of the occult, and certain to startle the ordinary reader with its narrative of lethal excesses. Here is Crowley the boyish introvert, the adolescent dabbler in black magic, the bloated adult, frenzied with drugs in his pagan Abbey of Thelema in Sicily, finally the shriveled old man peddling aphrodisiacs in England; and through it all, a sorry tale of suicide and lunacy among his retinue. Mr. Symonds has drawn the picture of these latter-day Eleusinian mysteries in a compelling style, mercifully not lacking the saving grace of humour. The book has an impressive bibliography and is lavishly interlarded with ghoulish illustrations.

Lyric Poet

Mr. Cammell's study is an intimate personal memoir. It is plentifully garnished with anecdotes of Crowley's lighter side—if, indeed, there can be anything approaching even the subfuse in a character so darkly poised—and among them is an account of Crowley acting the laird at Boleskine, near Inverness.

The names of great contemporaries, from Yeats to Rodin and Augustus John, adorn the traffic of Mr. Cammell's pages. And it is here that the emphasis of this book lies. For, while not unwilling to admit Crowley's addiction to blasphemy and diabolism, Mr. Cammell is chiefly concerned with promoting his claims as a lyric poet and an original thinker.

But, even to the indulgent mind, he will seem to protest too much. For example, to list Crowley with Milton and Pope, in virtue of their common use of alliteration, does scant service to Crowley. And as an original thinker, Crowley has done little more than Anglicise some quite innocuous ancient Greek words. For all that, Mr. Cammell is a plausible special pleader, with a shrewd, analytic mind, though his prose verges on the unduly rhapsodical at times.

Mr. Clark's book takes up the Crowley motif with the description of a visit by the author to the Abbey at Cefalu in Sicily. He has some wittily evocative things to say of Crowley at second hand, while commentators of the future will be exercised, no doubt, to note that in quoting from Crowley's Hymn to Pan, Mr. Clark reads "careening" as against the "careering" of Messrs. Symonds and Cammell. For the rest, Mr. Clark's book is a racy story of adventures in post-war Sicily and the Aeolian Islands.