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## EDITORIAL: THE SIGRID UNDSET CENTENARY

R.V.Y.

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MAY 20, 1982, WILL MARK THE CENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF ONE OF THE GREATEST Catholic writers of the twentieth century, the Norwegian novelist Sigrid Undset. It is important that we honor her memory on this occasion, not only because such homage to a significant modern witness to the Faith is in every way fitting, but also because the profound wisdom and power of her work can be of such benefit to our troubled Church in these times. Regrettably, there is little likelihood that the hundredth anniversary of her birth will generate for her literary achievement the degree of attention it deserves among scholarly and literary circles, even of Catholic orientation. In some measure this neglect is the result of accidents of birth. Norway is hardly the cultural center of Europe; and, although her major novels have been translated into all the principal European languages and some non-European languages, literary scholars do not generally work with translations. Moreover, such scholarly attention as Norwegian literature has received in Europe and America is usually devoted to Henrik Ibsen—a figure far more agreeable to the modern climate of opinion. To compound the error of her place of birth, Undset also chose a bad year: 1982 is also the centenary of the birth of James Joyce, and it is doubtful whether most journals specializing in modern literature will notice much else at this time.

We believe that the novels of Sigrid Undset merit continued attention merely as works of literature judged by literary standards. Still, they are of particular value to Catholics and deserve to be remembered and—above all—read by the faithful. As a part of the apostolate of scholarship discussed in this space in our previous number, we propose to devote a forthcoming number in the 1982 volume of FAITH & REASON to essays about Sigrid Undset; and we wish to take this opportunity to issue a “call for papers” for this special purpose. Obviously we are hoping to receive submissions from scholars with expertise in Scandinavian literature, but we also plan to consider critical essays, or essays of general scholarly interest, which treat Undset’s works in translation. Send all manuscripts for this special number of F&R to the associate editor; R.V. Young, Jr. / Department of English / N.C. State University, P.O. Box 5308 / Raleigh, N.C. 27650.

In the meantime we wish to urge our readers who are unfamiliar with the works of Sigrid Undset to make a point of reading at least one between now and the centenary. Her generally acknowledged masterpiece is the trilogy dealing with medieval Norway, *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920-22), which is still available in a one-volume hardbound edition from Knopf, and has been recently reissued in three inexpensive paperbound volumes (with rather lurid covers). Her later and equally brilliant medieval tetralogy, *The Master of Hestviken* (1925-27), is likewise available from Knopf in a one-volume edition. Daughter of one of Norway’s most distinguished nineteenth-century archaeologists, Sigrid Undset displays remarkable erudition in her re-creation of the details of medieval life; but the achievement of her novels is by no means limited to antiquarian reconstruction, nor is there a trace of romanticization or sentimentality in her depiction of the great age of faith in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. (It is worth noting that *Kristin*

*Lavransdatter* was published more than two years before Undset was received into the Church late in 1924.) Instead, Undset gives a portrayal of an age in which the Church labored with a violent and barbaric people, ever ready to lapse into paganism or sensuality. In her individual characters we see doubt, anguish, and obstinacy; lust, ambition, and greed, which remind us, perhaps, all too easily of ourselves. And yet the dynamic center of all her work is a fierce love of truth and a profound conviction of the goodness of God and His creation.

Sigrid Undset did not write novels of the Middle Ages only, nor, for that matter, was her work confined to fiction. Both before and after the great historical novels of the 1920's, she wrote fictional works dealing with modern times; and undoubtedly the unblinking verisimilitude of her depictions of medieval life is in part attributable to her apprenticeship in the school of late nineteenth-century realism. Her essays, especially those collected in *Stages on the Road* (1934) and *Men, Women, and Places* (1939), comprise some of the best efforts in apologetics and hagiography of our era.

The dominant secularism of contemporary criti-

cism and academic scholarship has been all too willing to allow the works of Sigrid Undset to slide into neglect; it will be shameful if Catholics do likewise. Her novels and essays seem a gift of God designed especially for the succor of Christianity in our times. Here is a woman writer who commands sufficient intellectual respect to have won the Nobel Prize (1928), whose works have also continued to exert significant popular appeal, and whose vision of the human condition—even before her conversion—accords as much as that of any novelist of our century with the teaching of the Church. Moreover, she is at her best in dealing with the relationship between men and women and the special role of women in culture. If her novels of the past suggest the perennial nature of the feminine response to the world, her novels of the present reveal a subtle sensitivity to the particular anguish faced by women in modern industrial societies. I would especially cite in this regard *Images in a Mirror* (1917/1938). Given her extraordinary insight in treating what may be the most pressing issue of practical life currently confronting Christians, the fiction of Sigrid Undset is too rich a treasure for Catholics to ignore.

R.V.Y.



## NEWS

Please take careful note of the fact that Christendom Publications and Christendom College (and so *Faith & Reason*) moved during the month of June to a larger facility in Northern Virginia. The new address is: Box 287, Boyce, VA 22620. Use this address for all correspondence except book reviews.

Followers of R.V. Young's book review section will be delighted to learn that his full-length study of the work of the 17th century English Catholic poet Richard Crashaw has been accepted for publication by Yale University Press. For a taste of Dr. Young's scholarship in this field, see his article on Crashaw in *F&R* IV, 3 (Fall 1978).

We are very pleased to announce that *F&R* contributor and board member Rev. Edward J. Berbusse, S.J. will become the resident priest at Christendom College beginning with the Fall 1981 term. His duties will include teaching, counselling and providing sacramental ministry to the College community.

Some back issues of *F&R* are now out of print. Limited numbers of the following issues are available. At \$3.00 each—I, 1; II, 2-3; III, 1-2; IV, 1-4; V, 1-4. At \$3.50 each—VI, 1-4; VII, 1. Readers interested in maintaining complete collections would do well to fill gaps now: stocks of several more issues are already very low.

J.A.M.