

beneath this crude exterior there was a great beauty of soul, and this comes through in many of his poems. Of his 253 extant poems, no fewer than 138 include explicitly religious themes, images or allusions, and God is mentioned over 100 times. He found God "in the bits and pieces of every day". He had a Hopkins-like love for nature and a keen sense of the divine presence in creation, of the 'beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God breathing his love by a cutaway bog' (The One). He looked on the commonplace as a visionary. And he saw his role as a poet 'to smelt in passion the commonplaces of life'. (After Forty Years of Age). 'For we must record love's mystery without claptrap/Snatch out of time the passionate transitory. (The Hospital). Naming places was important for him – it gave them a kind of immortality. Otherwise, who would have heard of Shancoduff or Cassidy's hanging hill, or Inniskeen Road?

All this, and much more, is beautifully illustrated in this production, in which there is a seamless weaving of Kavanagh's life and poetry. Sr Una detects the underlying autobiographical thread in many of the poems so that, to a large extent, we have Kavanagh's own words charting the development of his life, up to the point where he found his 'hegira' or rebirth by the banks of the Grand Canal, 'pouring redemption for me'. That serenity persisted up to the time of his death in the Merrion Nursing Home, off Baggot St., a few years later. When he died, his wife of less than a year, Katherine Moloney, was heard to remark: 'There goes all I know of God'.

This triple CD is beautifully produced by Éist Studies. Its library format makes it a delight to handle while the selection of rustic images and photos chosen to illustrate the work are perfectly suited to Kavanagh's poetry. Its accompanying booklet contains a wealth of scholarly reference material while the musical excerpts woven into the fabric of the production, through the hands of Pauline Johnson, make of these CD's a thoroughly pleasurable and spiritually enriching listening experience.

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**The Wisdom of Love in the Song of Songs.** Stefan Gillow Reynolds, (London: Hikari Press). Pp. 355. Price: £25.00. ISBN: 978-0-9956478-2-4

For fifteen hundred years, from the second century to the seventeenth, the Song of Songs was read by Jews and Christians as a sacred text. It seemed on the surface to be about the love of a man and a woman, but it was, in fact, about the love of God for humankind. The human story was a metaphor for the divine. This reading of the biblical book inspired, among Christians especially, a rich mystical literature: in the third century the commentaries of Origen; in the twelfth, the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux; in the sixteenth, the poetry and prose of John of the Cross. But in the seventeenth century the tradition faltered. The Song came to

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be seen instead as a tale of human love to which religious meanings had later become attached. Its character was secular, not sacred. Faced with this development, the religious approach to the Song declined. The stream of mystical commentaries dried up. Today the Song is rarely cited in the liturgy, or chosen for private *lectio divina*. Does this mean that it can no longer be read as a sacred text? The passionate answer of this book is No. *The Wisdom of Love in the Song of Songs* falls into three parts. In the first part, on the literal meaning of the poem, Dr Reynolds takes on those scholars who argue that as a human love story the biblical text makes no sense. It is, they say, a collection of fragments that do not make a whole. On the contrary, he replies, it tells a tale that is coherent. Set in the time of King Solomon, though written much later, it portrays a love affair between the monarch and a country girl of unusual beauty and wisdom. Because of the social gap between them, the affair cannot end in marriage, and at the conclusion of the Song they part, unable to live together in this world. But their love, which has transformed them both, survives.

In the second part, on the spiritual meaning, Dr Reynolds asks: what kind of love does the Song portray? And he answers by combatting the views of those who hold that the Song is erotic in the Freudian sense of *eros*: that is to say, an expression of sexual passion, in which the spiritual dimension is illusory. Instead he invokes a definition of *eros* that is more ancient: the longing of the lover's soul for union, of body and spirit, with the beloved, and, through the beloved, with all things and the divine.

Finally, in the third part, Dr Reynolds considers the Song's symbolic sense. He looks back over the traditions of Jewish and Christian exegesis, and asks what meaning can the Song have for us moderns. What does it say about love to those who are solitary or celibate? To those who are lesbian or gay? To married couples with a family? To psychologists, especially those who follow Jung? To the deepest longings of the human heart? His answers are never less than lively and profound.

In its content this is a significant book, and as an object it is attractive too. The cover, the binding, the typeface, and the many illustrations, some in colour, are pleasing to the eye, and Dr Reynold's style is pleasing to the ear: he writes with grace. These qualities are appropriate, for the Song is about beauty, the beauty that draws forth love. The book has the merit too of raising further questions. Can the human love it traces in the Song be read as a metaphor for divine love? And can mystical readings of the text be in this way recovered, not only in scholarship but in prayer?

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