

## UNMIXED BLESSINGS

A. W. BALDWIN: *The Macdonald Sisters*. 238pp. Peter Davies. 30s.

Among the advantages of an Establishment is that it provokes sincere dissent. The Macdonald sisters of Lord Baldwin's book were Alice, Mrs. Kipling; Georgiana, Lady Burne-Jones; Agnes, Lady Poynter; and the author's grandmother, Louisa, Mrs. Baldwin. They were four of the eleven children born to a Methodist minister and Hannah his wife, *née* Jones. Their grandfather had also been a Methodist minister, and the tradition was carried on by the Reverend Frederick Macdonald, the younger of the girls' two brothers who survived infancy.

Sincere dissent puts people on their best behaviour, and whereas revolutionaries want to kill or at least humiliate those they disapprove of, dissenters are sometimes content to set a good example. The Macdonald parents set an admirable example. Devoted to their children, dutiful, unbigoted and philosophical, they lived their Christianity. Hannah in particular, with her "gloom-shot wit", was a great character.

Like the Quaker Gurneys in Norfolk half a century earlier, the family had a life-long friendship for one another. But there were marked differences between the circumstances of the Gurneys and the Macdonalds. The Gurneys were very well-off and had their lovely house Earlham. The Earlham of the Macdonalds, such as it was, moved every three years; and yet, uprooted from Huddersfield to Birmingham, to London, to Manchester, to Wolverhampton, they were always at home together, and how those girls managed to become so richly bourgeois is only not a mystery because we know that if the stock is good miracles happen. When they already had four children the Macdonalds' income was about £160 a year; it was never proportionately much more. And when the first of the sisters got married, she, Georgiana, and Edward Burne-Jones started life together on £55.

Lord Baldwin tells the story very well—tells it with the help of quotations from many letters and remembered conversations, and with a proper emphasis on those questions of temperament that interest us so much nowadays, as of course they should. Indeed the book is out-

standing, of its kind about as good as it could be. The most subtle and interesting of the sisters was Georgiana, the most religious Louisa Baldwin, the most regularly beautiful Aggie, Lady Poynter; Alice Kipling, mother of the family's man of genius, seems to have been the least feminine of them—unless this was true of the unmarried Edith, who lived to be ninety and had a robust wit. Of the hymn in which occur the words "I long to be where Jesus is" she remarked:

If, while the congregation were singing those lines, a voice from heaven cried: "Not one of you shall leave this Church alive", there would be some nice chalk-coloured faces.

How did those nomadic girls meet their future husbands? Their elder brother Harry was at school at St. Edward's, Birmingham, and this was how Burne-Jones came into their lives and, in London later, the other artist, Edward Poynter, because he and Burne-Jones moved in the same circles. Alice and John Kipling met by chance. Louisa went to stay with the Baldwins, who were Methodists, as they and her parents were old friends. Harry going to school at St. Edward's also involved them memorably with William Morris and his coterie, one of whom, Heeley, had been in love with the charming Carrie, who died when she was only sixteen. Georgiana became Morris's greatest friend; he confided in her, wrote her many letters and relied on her for sympathy at bad moments.

It remains rather strange that in a family where there was so much compatibility, such easy communication, the little boy born to Alice should have been left in misery with the wretched Mrs. Holloway, and for five whole years, while his parents were in India. After the first nine months the good grandmother and aunts Aggie, Georgie and Louisa "spent a week or two in lodgings together at Southsea to satisfy themselves that all was well. These wise and loving women remarked nothing untoward". Clearly the fair-minded author is as puzzled as we are. The real wonder, however, is not that Rudyard could not or would not tell, but that Alice Kipling "had never thought of leaving her children with her own family, it led to complications. . . ." The words are Miss Plowden's; Edith Plowden was long

a friend of all of them, and her notes are among Lord Baldwin's main sources.

The author does not here attempt to make an historical assessment of his father, the Prime Minister; he has done so elsewhere. What he has to say of him as a man

is not out of place in this family chronicle. On Stanley Baldwin's fifty-seventh birthday his mother wrote to him: "You have been a joy & a comfort to me all your life as you were to your dear Father for forty years, & we both love you & thank you for it."