

Rev. Fr. ALEXANDER CALDER

S.D.B. (R.I.P.)

Father Alexander Calder was born at Southampton on 10th December, 1901. He was thus 65 years of age at the time of his death.

It was on 9th September, 1919 that I first met him. He was then a young man of nearly eighteen, and had come from Farnborough to Battersea to join a group of us who were that day travelling to Burwash to commence our novitiate. It was the first novitiate after the First World War, and was special in another way, too. Ten of us began it; eleven were professed at its end.

It might be said that, like 'omnis Gallia' of old, our group was divided into three parts. Two sections of it came from Battersea: the first section made up of young men just returned from the battlefields of Europe—two of whom, Frs. McCabe and Collinson, are happily here with us to-day; and the second—of whom I was one—of boys who had just finished their schooling and aspirantship in the London house. The third section consisted of Alexander Calder and a companion from Farnborough. They had been pupils and, more recently, student-teachers there. It might perhaps be fair to say that the Battersea section was the more plebeian; the Farnborough one brought with it a touch of the aristocracy. Let me explain.

It is probably a little difficult to visualise things as they then were. Apart from a small school—now long closed—at East Hill, Wandsworth, there were only two schools properly so-called in the province Battersea and Farnborough and the rivalry between them was intense. Don Bosco's own foundation—Battersea—was traditionally associated with a less affluent type of boy than those at Farnborough. It was devoted to Fr. Macey. The comparatively new school at Farnborough, under the dynamic leadership of

Fr. Sutherland, was setting a hot pace. Its sights were aimed high. Eton suits were worn on Sundays, and the sky was the limit only provided one could get no further. If the immediate pre-novitiate preparation of the Battersea group happened to have been more decorative than Farnborough's on this occasion, it was only because, under the eagle eye of Fr. Rabagliati, we had spent it distempering classrooms and the rest.

It is a tribute to Fr. Calder that, in spite of his costlier suits and distinguished bearing, he at once became a great friend of us all. And the reason for that happy impact is not hard to find. He was then, as to the end of his days, one of nature's gentlemen.

After his novitiate, he went to the newly-opened house of studies at Cowley to commence his philosophy. In 1921 he was sent to Battersea as a teacher, remaining there until 1926. Meantime, as was the unavoidable custom of those times when personnel was so very scarce, he continued his studies of philosophy and theology. He had received the religious habit from Father Franco at Burwash in November, 1919, was professed triennially there on 18th September, 1920, and was perpetually professed at Battersea on 8th December, 1923. In 1926, he received the tonsure and minor orders from Bishop Brown of Pella, and then went to Italy to prepare for his ordination, which took place at the hands of Cardinal Gamba in Turin on 8th July, 1928. His stay in Italy cannot have been at all easy for him. The rather explosive Italian and South American types at the 'Crocetta' could not make out the so-called English gentleman. He was, in fact, by origin a Scot. His calm and measured progress was far removed from their ebullience. It must have been exceedingly trying to him to tolerate their somewhat uninhibited ways. But his self-mastery and his complete dedication to his vocation saw him safely through.

He came back to England after his ordination, and what a joy it must have been to him to be posted back to his old school at Farnborough! There he remained until six years later, in 1934, he was transferred to "Thornleigh", which he was to get to love so much, and where he was destined to spend the rest of his life. He was a talented art-master—a treasure for any school—and, for a while, also taught French. Ill-health however attacked him and, reluctantly, he was forced into retirement. For well over a decade his classroom and his special subject was, in God's good designs, his noble and dignified carrying of the Cross. Thomas Merton says that "the mere fact of becoming a well-working cog in an efficient religious machine will never make anyone into a saint if he does not seek God interiorly in the sanctuary of his own soul". Here, I think, we come very close to the true estimate of Fr. Calder; the tremendous reality of his priesthood and his religious life in his complete and fully-accepted sacrificial union with God.

Throughout his life he was a man of great integrity, of utter loyalty and of deep personal piety. He loved his home and he loved his school. It is significant that, in the story of the college at Farnborough, the loyalty of its past-pupils from Southampton has always been traditional and outstanding. He loved this country and all that Britain stands for. But, loyal Britisher that he was, this never propounded for him any need or desire to belittle or insult those of another race. Rather did his mind work in the spirit that to be a true son of Britain one must, at all times, be, in the best sense, a gentleman. His was christian loyalty, not antagonising bigotry.

He was the most loyal of Salesians; devoted to the Congregation, to Our Lady, Help of Christians, to the spirit of St. Francis of Sales and of St. John Bosco. And, in the genuine spirit of Salesian family life, he was a brother to all his confrères everywhere.

All at "Thornleigh" are well aware of the love he had for this house and school, and his loyalty to them. He was intensely interested in the true progress of the school, and was eager to know what was proposed, and to offer his help in any way he could. And how deeply he appreciated the kindness, interest, help and support given it by the secular clergy of the area; by men, for instance, like the late Fr. Thomas McGrath—to quote but one example! And when visitors

came, whether from overseas or from nearer home, he was always ready with the welcome of a friend. In whatever he undertook, however humble the task, he was fidelity itself. Fr. Gordon, his late Rector, was telling me only a day or so ago of the loyalty with which, for years, he daily undertook certain rather uninspiring but very necessary patrols around the school.

He never imposed on anyone, nor ever asked for special attention. He loved reading, for instance, and in days gone by made regular trips to the local library. But when the walk became too much for him, he never pressed anyone to get books for him, but he was immensely appreciative of the kindness of anyone who, whilst he was out, rendered this service to him.

As a companion, he was most pleasant. A walk with him was a treat, for he was well-read, and his knowledge of nature, of architecture and the rest was profound. How he loved, too, the countryside and the lakes! No doubt there he felt very close to God.

The greatness of Fr. Calder was seen not least in these latter times, when he was unable to say Mass, in the regularity of his visits and prayers before the Blessed Sacrament; in the daily effort to be present at Holy Mass and, especially since this chapel was opened, I am told, in the ready and happy way in which he would, without being asked, go forward to take over an altar and serve Mass. This is something which is in the best traditions of this province; and which tells, too, of Fr. Calder's piety, charity, humility and sterling goodness.

No-one who has seen him over the last ten years or more can have any doubt but that life must very often have been very weary to him. How could it be otherwise when he suffered so much! Yet it is a mark of the christian and priestly nobility of the man that he never let that weariness overflow on to others. He shared his cross with his Lord.... "Offering himself a sacrifice, holy, pleasing and acceptable to God".

Now surely the crown is his, and Our Lady has taken him to meet her Son.

Whilst we offer our prayerful sympathy to his sister, and to all dear to him, we thank, through her, the family that gave to God and to us so sincere a priest and religious, and so great a gentleman. To the Father of all goodness, through Mary most holy, we now commend him. May he rest in peace. Amen.