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Preface

Sometimes we may pull out a play or a poem . . . and see whether it reads differently in the presence of the author. But this again rouses other questions. How far, we must ask ourselves, is a book influenced by its writer's life – how far is it safe to let the man interpret the writer? How far shall we resist or give way to the sympathies and antipathies that the man rouses in us?

* * *

One way of approaching Robinson Crusoe . . . [is] through the life of the author. Here . . . in the heavenly pastures of biography we may spend more hours than are needed to read the book itself from cover to cover . . . Only now and then, as we turn from theory to biography and from biography to theory, a doubt insinuates itself – if we knew the very moment of Defoe's birth and whom he loved and why . . . should we suck an ounce of additional pleasure from Robinson Crusoe or read it one whit more intelligently?

For the book itself remains.

Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*¹

The principal aim of this book is to set and evaluate Hopkins's poetry within the context of his own life, particularly that part of it which was spent as a Jesuit, when his major work was written.

As Virginia Woolf's words remind us, it is not always easy to achieve this without implying that biographical knowledge is the indispensable key to critical appreciation. 'Background' information might indeed enable us to understand what was not clear before and, by so doing, increase our ability to enjoy, but the poetry, in Hopkins's case, remains precisely what it was and our critical approach is, or should be, on radically different lines from the biographical.

The few facts provided by his great friend and first editor, Robert Bridges, a rather romantic and brief biography by a fellow Jesuit,² and a scattering of personal reminiscences of unreliable value, meant that, until 1935, Hopkins was a shadowy figure. Since that date, his

letters, journals, many books and articles, popular and scholarly, have made him one of the most written about, not necessarily best documented, figures of his time. Part of his Jesuit career was minutely covered by Fr Alfred Thomas in a work published in 1969³ but it was not Fr Thomas's purpose to make a personal assessment of the success of these years or of the poetry written during them.

Later biographical studies have attempted a more literary approach, without neglecting the all-importance of the Jesuit life in so doing.⁴ Even in those periods when no or little poetry was being written – and Hopkins was abnormally sensitive to such times – his spiritual and practical life as a member of that order went on unabated and, no doubt, continued to influence the poetry he was still to write. In Mark Twain's image, a poet is like a reservoir, perpetually accumulating what will eventually result in (to use Wordsworth's phrase) the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'.

Writing in her *Four Metaphysical Poets* more than fifty years ago, Joan Bennett declared that a 'background of common experience' as a human being is the principal requirement in reading Hopkins, adding, however: 'Given two readers of equal sensibility the more widely read has always an advantage.'⁵ Although I recognise the truth of this qualification, I would not seek to exaggerate it: the reader of Hopkins who knows 'everything' about the poet is in danger of not seeing the wood for the trees. In the end, as Virginia Woolf puts it, the poetry 'itself remains', and the appreciation and enjoyment of it is the ultimate purpose to which this study is directed.

Notes

1. V. Woolf, *The Common Reader*, Second Series (London, 1965) pp. 263 and 51–2.
2. Fr G. F. Lahey, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London, 1930)
3. Fr A. Thomas, *Hopkins the Jesuit: The Years of Training* (London, 1969).
4. The most recent of these biographies, Norman White's *Hopkins: A Literary Biography* (London, 1992), came too late to make use of in this book.
5. Reprinted in *Hopkins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. G. Roberts (London, 1987) pp. 289–90.

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G.R.