

Robert Handicott

DEBRE LIBANOS

St Tekle Haymanot, we're told,
Lived twenty-nine ascetic years
High up above the vale of tears
Inside a cave, where buckets hold
The heavy seepage from the rock
That's holy water to the flock.

For seven years, the story goes,
He prayed while standing on one foot
And, when the leg fell off with rot,
Was given wings. The monks suppose
Beneath the altar of the shrine
He's buried, dead at ninety-nine.

It happened that the very day
We came to view the monastery
Was held the anniversary
Of Tekle Haymanot's display
Of hovering faith. The crowds were thick
That hoped for healing of the sick

And pressed for luck around the bus
Of healthy-looking Western faces:
Ethiopian holy places
Seldom saw the likes of us
Descend from places far away
To honour such a holiday.

The shrine was cut off by the sea
Of pilgrims; but we made a dash
Past numerous hands held out for cash
And, paying the official entrance fee,
Set out to find the ancient cave
Behind the modern dome and nave.

A twenty-minute climb; and then
The bush track ended at a gate
Outside of which we had to wait
Until the monks were ready, when
We entered, slipped off shoes and socks,
And hobbled humbly over rocks

Up to a wall and door. Inside,
Our eyes adjusting to the gloom,
Our feet to wet linoleum,
We felt the tourist's surge of pride:
So this is what we've come here for!
And stood in wonder at the awe-

Inspiring practicalities.
Cheap plastic tubs and buckets caught
The droplets that would soon be bought
By prayerful sufferers of disease
— Even the Emperor Menelik
Once traveled here to try the trick —

And that was it. No more to see;
Though in a corner near the rocks
A monk tapped a collection box
To stimulate our charity.
(A five birr note, and tapping ceased:
The wizened monk looked very pleased.)

No postcards, gifts or geegaws sold;
But medieval enterprise
That catered for the faithful. Lies?
Perhaps. But not the lie that's told
In Western church-museums. Respect
For reverence caused us to reflect.

The Carlstadts and Voltaires will come
To this as to all Christian cultures,
Tearing with talons like so many vultures
The fabric of the spirit's home.
Old Ge'ez must go as Latin went,
Reformers must experiment

For good and ill, and every phase
Of martyrdom must be played out
In deeds we'll never know about
Till Judgement. In mysterious ways
A million saints that time forgot
May outsoar Tekle Haymanot.

And yet: his shallow cave contains
A minimum of sacred kitsch
For Carlstadts and Voltaires to ditch;
The shrine may house his real remains.
We stood outside the cave-mouth wall
Less cocky that we knew it all.

Though legends of the saints provoke
The skeptic in the Western soul,
We could not wish to bury whole
The living faith of needy folk
For whom the folksy tales express
The miracle of holiness.

We set our tourist's doubts aside
And donned our socks and shoes in hopes
That claims of councils and of popes
I this case might be justified
And one loved saint of history
Be all he was cracked up to be.

