

THE TRAVELLERS' LIBRARY

By

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With the publication of *Thirty Tales* by H. E. Bates, *Green Hell* by Julian Duguid, and *But for the Grace of God* by J. W. N. Sullivan, the Travellers' Library reaches its two hundredth volume and a chance is given to estimate the publishers' achievement. That it is an unusual one, is obvious, I think, from the choice of these latest volumes, which happen to represent the three main divisions of the library — fiction, travel and reminiscence. Most publishers have an idiosyncrasy; some book, which has proved an unexpected best seller, leaves an indelible mark on their lists; an element of political propaganda maybe, a spirit of blithe or naughty picaresque, perhaps a touch of precociousness, of eighteenth-century pastiche. It is the complete absence of standardization which is the most marked characteristic of the Travellers' Library.

Take Mr. Bates for example. No writer to-day owes less to his contemporaries. His debt to Tchekoff is obvious, but the influence is a direct one, not by way of Katherine Mansfield, and he has naturalized Tchekoff in a way that Katherine Mansfield, perhaps because of her colonial birth and lack of a local root, was unable to do. To my mind Mr. Bates is a more conscious and a more controlled writer. His stories express a

mood by means of a severe limitation. His own emotions are not allowed to lap over the edge of his stories as Katherine Mansfield's so often did. This first selection of his tales adds distinction to a library which has made less compromise with popularity than any other series at the price (one remembers its predecessors, the volumes by Ambrose and Bierce, by Mr. Coppard and by Mr. Joyce). In the tone of its prose, in the sense of a poetic imagination working in a localized area, *Thirty Tales* takes its place beside *Dubliners*. And *Dubliners* contains surely the finest short story written in English since the death of James — I mean *The Dead*.

Green Hell won immediate popularity because of the contemporary interest in its subject, travel in South America. They are curios, these literary currents — to the South Seas in the 'nineties, to Africa a few years ago. Mr. Duguid is not a conscious stylist, as are some of his successors, Mr. Peter Fleming, Mr. Evelyn Waugh, Mr. Aldous Huxley, but he writes in good workaday prose which does not disgrace a library especially rich in travel books. I suspect that here we are close to the publisher's idiosyncrasy; there was a time when the name of Cape brought to mind whalers and southern seas and rather tiresome old men with beards recounting incredible exploits.

But one can forgive a good many southern seas and ancient mariners to a publisher who includes in a three and sixpenny library *The Travels of Marco Polo* and that superb book William Lithgow's *Rare Adventures and Painefull Peregrinations*. Published in 1632, when the boisterous Elizabethan prose was wearing thin, it represents the transition from Nash to Donne. The euphuisms are still there, but they adorn a shroud. 'My roome,' Lithgow wrote of his imprisonment by the Inquisition, 'was made a darke-drawn Dungeon, my belly the anatomy of mercillesse hunger, my comfortlesse hearing, the receptacle of sounding Bells.'

Last, but not least admirable, Mr. Sullivan's autobiography, a curious, complex, candid document, a self-exposure without a trace of self-pity. I read the book when it first appeared more than a year ago and the memory is still vivid. A series which includes in its section of reminiscences this lantern slide of bared nerves, the grace and quietude of George Bourne's *A Farmer's Life*, and the seventeenth-century *Military Memoirs* of Captain George Carleton, whose portrait of the professional soldier of the day is an invaluable complement to the fornicating blades of Aphra Behn, cannot be accused of standardization.

There are no limits to the possibilities of this most catholic of libraries, and the publisher must be inundated by suggestions. Lovers of travel books will dream of a day when Thicknesse will be represented here, while those who possess the short stories of Bierce in this series may long to be able to acquire Stephen Crane's *The Open Boat*, for years out of print in England. My personal wish is to see the method of Mr. Hamish Miles in his admirable *Selections from Byron* extended, a criticism and a biography by means of extracts from a writer's work. I dream, for example, of a Dryden arranged by Professor Grierson.

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