

## COUNTRY WAYS AND PLACES

ALPINE UTILITY: *Flowermen's Clocks*. Faber and Faber. 10s. 6d.  
H. E. BATES: *The Face of England*. Batsford. 21s.

Among writers on country ways Mrs. Utley holds a special place. Readers of her *Country Hoard* and *The Farm on the Hill* will return with pleasure to the North Country farm life which she knows so well and describes with feminine awareness of detail and a poet's clarity of vision. Other landscapes appear occasionally in these essays; there is mention of an old vicarage in Cheshire, and the wild flowers of the Chilterns, but it is the North Country farmhouse roots which give the underlying strength and continuity.

More than anywhere else in the house, there was this feeling of continuity about the kitchen, where generations had lived, a room which seemed to exist in four dimensions, space and time itself, as the earth rolled round and the house and rack upon which it stood moved with it through time.

The child who sat by the hearth in that kitchen, gazing "into the caves and flickering golden places of the fire as children nowadays watch the television screen," belonged to a world as far from our present mode of living as the harness which hung on the walls, or the stoneware jug of home-made herbal brews which everyone in the household sipped for their health.

It is well that faithful and vivid writers such as Mrs. Utley should set down these things before they are forgotten, and Mr. C. F. Tunncliffe's illustrations in black and white give added charm to a serene book.

We may regret the lost simplicity and graces of life as portrayed in *Flowermen's Clocks*, but in his essay on *The Face of England* Mr. Bates insists that "the incessant impact of change" is our most valuable preservative, and that "the measure of loss is itself minute against the virility of the life we gain." He begins and ends his thesis from the point of view of one standing on a Kentish downland, surveying the pattern of varied country at his feet. This pattern of rural living, apparently immemorial, has in reality suffered violent change. The seemingly inviolate social pattern has been swept away, leaving, says Mr. Bates, in its place "a countryside more ordered, more happily

peopled, in better heart and in many ways more lovely."

These are brave words when most commentaries on present-day rural England tend to become jeremiads, if not wholehearted books of lamentation. But Mr. Bates has great faith in our "flexible, inventive, restless" race which has banished the pauper from our countryside and created instead a new Hodge who, even while embracing every new-fangled, labour-saving device has not lost "the earthiness of his independence." Yet, if farmer and farm labourer show traditional good sense, Mr. Bates has profound misgivings about "our monstrous suburban wastes, that are neither town nor country." H. for

Hunger, he comments on the television aerials which crown our indiscriminate strip building, since the Englishman continues his folly of plundering the land that would feed him.

Concerning the endlessly varied beauties of this land, Mr. Bates writes in the noble tradition of English country lovers. Mr. A. F. Kersting's photographs arouse more doubts. His publishers claim that they mirror the subtle tints of the English scene, and they are certainly an advance on much of the coloured photography of the past. But are the greens and browns really right? Is it, after all, "the earthiness" of the English landscape which is missing?

## FRESH FIELDS

IAN NIAL: *Pastures New*. Heinemann. 10s. 6d.

Mr. Nial roams the farm lands of his boyhood in reminiscence. Often he has a gun in his hand: sometimes his quest is for nothing more fugitive than mushrooms or blackberries. He has the trained eye of the born countryman, the insight into animal behaviour which enables him to locate the plover's nest at a distance from the spot whence the bird arose. He has a suggestion to account for the diminution in the number of these birds: it is that a man walking behind horses, ploughing or harrowing, would stop and move a nest out of the way, whereas the tractor-driver's eyes are often looking backward, and he is less likely to climb down from his machine than the horse-cultivator was to stop and stoop to what was at his feet.

Mr. Nial has established an individual style of writing and an individual type of book. Its appearance owes much to the wood engravings of Miss Barbara Greg; for, as in *Fresh Woods*, the narrative of *Pastures New* flows from first page to last without chapters. Her illustrations break up and vary the letterpress agreeably, which otherwise would be a solid mass of print. The book's flow approximates more to the ode or eulogy than to ordinary narrative. This is not to suggest that Mr. Nial's closely woven and sensitive writing is anywhere emperurbed:

it is honest and legitimate prose throughout. His feet are firmly on the earth while his eyes are on birds and the weather. He avoids also that incantatory rhythm in which the man of feeling is apt to impart his appreciation of nature. Mr. Nial's writing, unforced, never fails of the personal, the unexpected observation: "The breeze that sets the thorn scraping the stones of the wall." The book is short, entire in mood, and gives the impression of a single afternoon's reverie, even as if the pen had followed the train of thought without a break. The scene is static, yet Mr. Nial's prose marches. He employs certain methods to keep it moving: one of which is to take the reader along with him on his expeditious, addressing him personally as a companion by his side; with a final injunction as the sun sets on a day of sport, "Step lively, for we must cut down the Wee Field to recover our rabbits."

Mr. Nial adds to the knowledge of a naturalist the lore of the shooting man. To stalk game, whether with gun or camera, is to share something of their nature. He has also a knowledge, which has become as close as instinct, of the working of farm land. He is able to tell the whole story of the countryside, and he has amply fulfilled the promise of his title, *Pastures New*, by the time we come to his final sentence: "They are new for ever to those who walk on them with their eyes open."