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North-West by North¹

reviewed by H. E. Bates²

IN 1932 the author of this book, with two girl friends who were subsequently to prove not so friendly, the husband of one of them and a Swedish sailor named Sven, embarked on a voyage from Sydney to Singapore in a boat which was larger by four feet than that in which Mr. William Albert Robinson made his historic journey of thirty thousand miles. The *Skaga's* journey of only five thousand miles was accomplished in eight months. 'No engine was used,' says Mrs. Birtles; but this was hardly odd, since, though there was an engine, it refused to start on the only occasion when it was needed, with the result that the *Skaga* lay becalmed for days only a week's journey south of Singapore, its occupants living on dried peas, and the hearts of at least three of them in a state of mutinous hatred. The combined effects of a diet of dried peas and feminine hatred were disastrous, and the cruise of the *Skaga*, like the cruise of the *Foundling* in Crane's story, can hardly be called historic.

Indeed, as a voyage purely, it was lamentable. Few boats can have sailed with such a nautically ignorant crew, or such an incompatible one. It is true that, with the exception of Sven, they were old friends; but there is no hatred like the hatred of friends, and this journey, so enthusiastically planned and joyfully anticipated, had scarcely begun before the captain (let us call him that)

¹ *North-West by North*, by Dora Birtles. Illustrated (Large Crown 8vo. 10s. 6d. net)

² Author of *The Poacher* (Crown 8vo. 7s. 6d. net), *The Fallow Land*, etc. etc.

and his wife began their unceasingly frigid, contemptuous and many ways inexplicable campaign of hatred against the woman who had been their friend for years. It astonishes me that this voyage ended as happily as it did. And it is ironical that the bare geographical record of it reads like the adventure of a crew of modern lotus-eaters on a journey to the happy isles: Great Palm Island, Green Island, Lizard Island, Thursday Island, Merauke, Dobo, Pulo Babi, Spice Islands, Ambon and Macassar. But the bare unpleasant fact is that it was a voyage of pea-eaters and a long journey of unhappy misunderstandings.

It is, however, precisely this episode of hatred which has made the book what it is: not merely the record of a voyage which must in any case have been done many times before, but the record of a revolution in the lives of four friends. And it is greatly to Mrs. Birtles' credit both as a writer and a woman that she has recorded it all as soberly and fairly as she has done: so soberly in fact and with such detachment that the book has the quality of fiction. The characters are clear and acidly sketched; the drama of hatred is implacably analysed and nicely sustained, and the atmosphere of heat and misery and beauty and perplexity admirably felt. Not least, the boat itself, the *Skaga*, emerges as a living thing. She seems to have been rather a clumsy craft: 'a solid, stolid, thirty-four-foot ship with a comparatively small sail area, clumsy heavy gear, a delayed reaction to the tiller.' But like Sven, the only real sailor she carried on that voyage, she was sound, obedient and utterly trustworthy. Happily boats are sometimes above the follies of those who sail in them.

And happily, too, the worst in life often brings out the best in a writer,

So that this book is a better book, more stimulating and richer in humanity, because Mrs. Birtles quarrelled with her friends than if she had sailed in genteel harmony with them. It is clear that she will never sail with them again; but she is too good a writer and an adventurer to stop at a single voyage or a single book. And fortunately there are always other boats, other seas, and, I only hope, other friends.

Love on the Dole

MR. WALTER GREENWOOD'S novel, *Love on the Dole*, was published by Jonathan Cape nearly two years ago, its author a young unemployed man with all-too-much first-hand knowledge of its tragic scene. It attracted wide attention, and a year later, in collaboration with Mr. Ronald Gow, the author produced a dramatized version of the novel, which, first produced in Manchester, has been playing almost continually ever since all over the North of England.

The play has at last come to London, and the dramatized version was published (3s. 6d. net) shortly before the production at the Garrick Theatre in January. The production, with Miss Cathleen Nesbitt, Miss Wendy Hiller, and Mr. Ballard Berkley in the leading parts, made an unusually deep impression; its theme and the treatment of it are moving, sincere, and actual; and the Press, from *The Times* to *The Daily Worker*, gave it a remarkably unanimous welcome, to which the public have not been slow to respond.

Mr. Greenwood has just completed the scenario of a new humorous film, in which Mr. Sydney Howard is starring — its scene, Lancashire; its title, *A Mitey Man*,

Butler Centenary

THE centenary of the birth of Samuel Butler will fall this year, on December the 4th, and there will be no lack of the usual centenary estimates and stock-taking. Butler's work — not only in the best-known volumes, *Erewhon*, *The Way of All Flesh*, and the *Note-Books* but in several minor books as well — retains an astonishing reserve of vitality; and there is a corresponding degree of general interest in the life and personality of this odd Ishmaelite of late Victorian Literature, who attracted so little attention in his own day, but who somehow projected his voice and ideas, with startling precision of aim, forward into the the present century.

We may be pardoned for a special interest in this particular centenary, as all of Samuel Butler's books have been published over the Cape imprint since 1921. And during 1935 we hope to publish two further books which will certainly attract the attention of Butlerians, old or new. The first will be the long and curious correspondence which Butler carried on with his friend Miss Savage. For many years these two exchanged letters, hardly ever meeting, but each constantly keeping in touch with the other. Most of these letters have survived, and are being prepared for publication by Mr. Geoffrey Keynes, who, with Mr. Brian Hill, is Butler's literary executor.

The second book will be a new biographical study of Butler by Mr. Malcolm Muggeridge, the assistant editor of the *Calcutta Statesman*. As he has a spirited pen, and has had access to some new sources of information, his book will be more than a conventional centenary tribute: indeed, it may flutter several doves quite alarmingly.