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Last Appearance

John McCormack, the Story of a Singer. By L. A. G. Strong. (Methuen. 15s.)

JOHN MCCORMACK has made his official farewell to his concert-public—he said good-bye to opera long ago—and now he performs the last sad rites of a singer's career and tells the tale of his success. For, although Mr. Strong's name is there on the title-page and his presence is felt whenever there is need for objective comment, this is in essence Mr. McCormack's autobiography. It differs from the autobiographies of most other singers only in its frank acknowledgement of literary aid. And Mr. McCormack has been fortunate in securing an artist of Mr. Strong's calibre to put his reminiscences into writing. And even though Mr. Strong has not achieved the impossible of making a masterpiece of his material, he has put together an interesting, and at times amusing, book. For his subject has a fund of good stories and all an Irishman's gusto in their telling.

McCormack is about the last survivor of that galaxy which shone so brilliantly in Covent Garden thirty years ago, and of which the bright particular stars were Melba, Caruso and Scotti, Tetrizzini and Emmy Destinn. He was but a minor luminary himself—a lyric tenor with a sweet, soft voice, a little too nasal, perhaps, in quality, and a master of *legato* phrasing. He aspired to none of the great roles—the Duke in *Rigoletto* and Don Ottavio were his highest flights; and Ottavio is only a *secondo uomo*. He names it as his favourite part, but he was most at home in *Bohème*. After 1914 he gave up opera, for though he pays tribute to various efforts to establish opera in English, he did not feel himself called upon to assist those efforts in any practical way. He took instead to the concert-platform in its most enormous form. Those who have heard him in private claim McCormack as a great *Lieder* singer, especially of Wolf. But those not so privileged had to judge from one or two specimens among the old classical airs and sentimental Irish songs which he knew so well how to put across, in an Albert Hall programme, and in the circumstances judgement on such a fine point was of little value. From the public point of view McCormack's contribution to music was negligible, great though the pleasure he gave with his voice.

Mr. Strong has added to these reminiscences a list of the records made by the singer and his contemporaries which will be of service to gramophone enthusiasts. That his musical

judgements, however, and even his factual accuracy are not above suspicion may be gathered from the following passage:

The Covent Garden season of 1913 was chiefly remarkable for the advent of Chaliapin. . . . People had not realised that a bass could not only be the hero of an opera, but could sing with the flexibility, the appeal, the finish, the dramatic power of a Caruso.

To anyone who has heard the two singers this is the higher nonsense. You might as well talk of the Pheidian grace and restraint of El Greco. And Chaliapin made his London debut not at Covent Garden, but at Drury Lane. DYNELEY HUSSEY.

Retirement

The Way to An Island. By R. M. Lockley. (Dent. 7s. 6d.)
Norney Rough. By Phyllis Nicholson. (Murray. 8s. 6d.)

Two charming light-weights: Mr. Lockley's a postscript to an earlier book, *I Know An Island*, Mrs. Nicholson's a vivacious, dry little vignette of a country house, its garden and the life that is possible on the salary of a retired Colonel of the Indian Army. Mr. Lockley was attracted very early in life to the idea of living on an island, and, unlike the literary gentleman in Lawrence's story, began in a small way and worked himself up. His mother kept a small private school in Wales, but the bonds of home-life, as usual, seemed hard, and a very small Lockley, together with two other adventurers, set off on a hopeful trek to the battlefields of Flanders, *via* Cardiff, on the proceeds of a pawned bike. Things went dismally wrong, and Lockley returned home for a good hiding and bouts of pneumonia and appendicitis. In convalescence he took to bird-study. With spare cash he bought Saunders *Manual of British Birds*, and at last, on a sickening summer day, took a sea-trip to Lundy Island and from there mournfully watched, with sea-sick eyes, his first Manx shearwaters heading north towards the islands of the Pembrokeshire coast. One of those islands, Skokholm, was to become his own. He was to lease it, repair its little farmhouse, live on it, breed its sheep, make war on its rabbits and watch its birds. On a wild February day a two-masted topsail wooden schooner, the 'Alice Williams,' was to sail down channel towards Bristol, spring a leak off the island, be abandoned by her crew off St. Ann's Head, and then smoothly and easily sail past the Trinity House tender and finally beach herself on Skokholm on top of the high spring tide. She was Lockley's for five pounds: every boy's dream, complete with salt-horse, smiling figure-head, oak timber and a hundred tons of coal. The story of the wreck and much of the subsequent history of the island bird-life is told with light, friendly charm, and the result is a happy book—a modern, minor *Crusoe*, in which some very sensible dreams came true.

The conventional seasonal pattern, the old story of retirement into the country, the making of a garden, the problems of domesticity and sewage, the charm and difficulty of country ways are all handled by Mrs. Nicholson with a kind of amontillado charm. This same dry delicacy also induces a regret—for here, it seems to me, is an uncommon talent that should devote its blending of satire and tolerant humour to fiction. Somewhere behind this excellent neat personal vignette of country retirement lies an ironical little novel of a decaying world: the ghastly world of inactivity, falling dividends and eternal hope, of nostalgic memories of Rawalpindi and Hong-kong, magnolias and fireflies, Aldershot and the Divisional dinner, of trembling social pride and those who cannot make do on £700 a year.

H. E. BATES.

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