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Mr. Walpole Justified

A BOOK WITH SEVEN SEALS. Anonymous. With a Preface by HUGH WALPOLE. Secker. 8s. 6d.

A BOOK WITH SEVEN SEALS is a novel—if indeed, as Mr. Walpole doubts, it can be called a novel at all—rather in the Victorian fashion, about those Victorian days when my grandfather was a young man and when Mr. Walpole himself was still too young to have begun writing his innumerable prefaces. It is fashionable at the moment to extol the Victorians and to decry Mr. Walpole.

We are inclined to reflect that, perhaps, after all the Victorians meant well, at the same time forgetting that Mr. Walpole may mean well too. In his enthusiasm for spotting masterpieces he is far from being infallible, but sometimes he hits his bull's-eye. He scored a bull with *Maurice Guest*, for which I owe him some gratitude, and he scores a bull as near as really matters with *A Book with Seven Seals*. "The value of this book is its truth," he says, "the savour of its very quiet humour, and the pathos of it, the beauty and a silence of a quite irrecoverable past."

Here, then, is a long book—a novel if you like, since the term is so elastic—simply chronicling the life of a Victorian clergyman's family. The parson has a son, appropriately named Roger, and two daughters, appropriately named Harriet and Mary Ann, and they all live together in a very leisurely way in a "right old, strong, roomy brick house, built nearly a hundred and fifty years ago, and likely to see three races of these modern fashionables fall before it comes down." And that is all—or almost all. The Danvers live their little lives and their anonymous author, whoever he is, chronicles their world calmly, gracefully, good-humouredly and a little long-windedly.

What is the story? What happens to these people? There is almost no story at all, and nothing happens beyond the things which are always happening to ordinary people every day. Like the maiden in the song, the daughters "went to Church and Sunday School and sang the Anthem sweet"—and there was fire down below! The Reverend Danvers preaches his sermon Sunday after Sunday and carves the cold mutton year in, year out. Many, many hymns are sung, and in that humdrum fashion life goes on, delicately coloured and a little faded and very true and touching, like an old sampler. Where, then, is the attraction of this book? Even Mr. Walpole confesses that it is long and artless. But I think that in its very length and its very artlessness lies, perhaps, the clue to its charm, for its whole charm is its perfection of atmosphere. We capture more than anything else the atmosphere of that life, the tediousness of its sermons, the boredom of its Sunday afternoons, the elegant littleness of it all. This is the kind of life which, to Jane Austen, was the raw material for satire and to Samuel Butler the raw material of satire and drama.

The author of *A Book with Seven Seals*, whoever he is, is neither an Austen nor a Butler, and beside the brilliance of much contemporary writing his writing may seem insipid. But I recommend his chronicle of "a quite irrecoverable past," to those who love the quiet word and the minor note, and to those who like to feel sometimes that the past is not so irrecoverable or so remote after all.**** H. E. BATES

Other Novels of the Week

BACK TO BOOL BOOL. By Brent of Bin Bin. Blackwood. 7s. 6d. The third novel in a saga of Australian life. A picture of a

group of pioneer families up-country and of their descendants in the towns. The author has humour and an individual style. He has feeling for his country, but deplors its lack of spiritual interests. A valuable contribution to Australian literature.****

DONA BARBARA. By Romulo Gallegos. Cape. 7s. 6d. A South African novel, translated from the Spanish, about a woman who became a great power on the Venezuelan plains. The story relates the romance of her girlhood, her hard and terrible life, and the glimpse of romance with which her life ended. A fresh and striking piece of work.****

THEY CAME TO THE CASTLE. By Anthony Bertram. Chapman and Hall. 7s. 6d. An old and impoverished Austrian family take paying guests in their castle in the Tyrol and the company that comes to it makes a splendid comedy of character, with the background of the mountains well described.****

THE RIPENING CORN. By Colette. Gollancz. 7s. 6d. Young love is a favourite subject of Colette's, and here she tells the story of two adolescents who fall in love at the seaside, how the boy is "betrayed" by an older woman, and how the girl comes to know it. She makes an idyll of it, and though we do not regard this as one of her best, the story must be read.***

TO THE GALLOWS I MUST GO. By T. S. Matthews. Hamish Hamilton. 6s. An American travelling salesman tells in a direct, naïve way how he came to murder the husband of a woman for whom he had a passing infatuation. A sordid, grim, but powerfully told story, with emphasis on psychology rather than murder.****

YOUNG ENGLISH. By A. Scott Daniell. Cape. 7s. 6d. A jolly, well-written school story, with a good touch of romance about it. If only all school days were like Billy's, this would be a happier world.***

GONE GAY. By R. S. Burton. Jenkins. 7s. 6d. Rushing round Europe, without moral values, a girl in the end finds happiness, but she paid a big price for it.***

FORTY STAY IN. By John W. Vandercook. Harpers. 7s. 6d. The scene is Liberia. The characters are a young artist and his wife and the other man she loves. The theme is passion.***

GREEN PLEASURE. By Elizabeth Barlow. Grant Richards. 7s. 6d. Virginia is a "country" young girl, fresh and simple-hearted; she loves one man, but marries another. The story is jejune, but the dialogue is delightfully natural and entertaining.***

TIMOTHY. By John Palmer. Eyre and Spottiswoode. 7s. 6d. A sentimental romance of considerable charm about the illegitimate son of an English baronet who is brought up with the legitimate heir. After many trials all turns out for the best.***

STUBBLY, THE STORY OF A CAT, as told by himself. The Epworth Press. 3s. 6d. Has an old-fashioned charm, and shows a real understanding of animals. Recommended to cat lovers.***

To enable readers to judge the merits of novels at a glance, we add stars to these short notices. Five stars denotes a masterpiece, four stars a novel of outstanding quality and so down to one star.