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Richard Church's Kent

HE BATES

WHEN I FIRST MET Richard Church, some 40 years ago, he was living in a flat at Lincoln's Inn. A little later he had a cottage in Essex. His health was not good and he found the chill winds of the East coast more and more difficult to bear. About this time he came to visit me in Kent, where he was much taken by the granary that my wife and I had converted, and where in fact we still live. So attracted was he by the house, and no less by the loveliness of the countryside about it that it didn't take a great deal of persuasion on my part to induce him to say goodbye to Essex and find himself somewhere in the county of hop-gardens, cherry orchards, Spanish chestnut woods and the incomparable beauties of the North Downs and their great acreage of primroses and bluebells.

In due course he found himself a substantial old oast-house standing on the edge of a cherry orchard, on a hillside near the warm orange-tiled village of Goudhurst, overlooking the most exquisite of valleys, thick with hop-gardens and alight with fruit blossom in spring. Like us, he duly converted his building and from that moment a new and happier phase of his life began. Like me, he

became more and more enamoured of Kent and much of his writing was subsequently about it. Never a very trenchant novelist but always a poet in a gentler mould, he found his true metier in extolling the beauty and character of his new-found kingdom.

Now, in his very last book*, he presents us with a vast range of Kentish characters, both famous and unknown, embracing people as far apart as Joan, 'the Fair Maid of Kent', born in 1328, Caxton, whom he regards, and I think quite rightly, as Kent's greatest son, and his fellow poet Victoria Sackville-West, also a near neighbour, in whose lovely garden he eventually lived in a cottage, having by that time disposed of his oast-house. In so short a review as this it is really impossible to set out in detail all that he attempts to do, but he writes with both felicity and assurance about all his characters and I can give no better indica-

tion of his plan and purpose, than to quote his own words:

I have framed up a certain selection of men and women, within a geographical enclosure, rather as an archaeologist stakes out a bit of ground which he fancies may house something to his particular interest. My particular interest is my fellow mortals, as individuals rather than as communities. And I make no apology for again referring to the fact that I am probably swimming against the tide, in which mass psychology comes rolling in like oil pollution, reducing the infinite variety of organic life to a lubricated extinction, as our technological expertise is doing over the oceans of the world.

It needs no elaborate elucidation to conclude from this that with much in our modern way of life he was out of sympathy. Among those to whom this does not apply were not only Hardy, William Barnes, Gilbert White, John Clare and Richard Jefferies, but a host of what he calls the inarticulate ones, the common folk of Kent—who, 'like the bees, have brought their pollen to the hive, this golden Kent, so rich in its store of honeyed achievement'.

RICHARD CHURCH
***Kent's Contribution**

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