

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1932.



"O'Flaherty has from his very earliest work been a paradoxical writer, at once fierce and tender, violent and dreamy, coarse and delicate, realistic and poetical."

"THE Weaver's Web" first appeared in 1896, and it is significant that "Skerratt" opens "on a wild day in February, 1887," for these two books, though published nearly forty years apart from each other, belong virtually to the same time, to an epoch when, more especially in remoter places like Ireland and Yorkshire, passions were fiercer and more primitive than to-day.

The books themselves afford interesting comparisons and contrasts. Both are narratives of bare simplicity, but at the same time of intense and rugged power. Both are indigenous, strong native growths of their own Irish and Yorkshire soil.

"Skerratt," in style, execution and construction, is modern. "The Weaver's Web," with its honest-to-God style, coloured with native idiom, its bold, straightforward execution, and its wild atmosphere, takes us instantly back to the days of the Brontës.

The power and art which Mr. O'Flaherty has brought to "Skerratt" takes us in turn back to his own early novel, "The Black Soul," a fierce and passionate novel which did much to make his name one of the most important among contemporary novelists. O'Flaherty has from his very earliest work been a paradoxical writer, at once fierce and tender, violent and dreamy, coarse and delicate, realistic and poetical.

It is astonishing but nevertheless perfectly characteristic that the man who wrote "The Puritan," that almost macabre picture of low Dublin life, should also have written some of the most exquisite animal stories in the language and some studies of Irish peasantry and fisherfolk which for simplicity and depth of tone and feeling have never been equalled by any other Irish writer.

It is significant that those stories, like "Skerratt," have for their background O'Flaherty's native Aran Islands, where life was almost unbelievably primitive when Skerratt arrived on a wild winter day in order to become the new schoolmaster. O'Flaherty, both directly and indirectly, begins to work up the atmosphere of wild and primitive barbarity at once.

"Up rose the island to the v'ew, ten miles to the south-west, a black spot on

O'Flaherty's Men— and a Yorkshire Chronicle

By H.E. Bates

the horizon, a dismal sea-lashed rock, lying across the harbour mouth from land to land except where two foaming channels east and west made roadways to the ocean. Through the eastern channel the ocean's fury swept into the bay."

This is how Skerratt sees the island. To his wife, sick and pregnant, it looks different. She sees it as a wild desert. Skerratt is angry because fate has robbed him of the chance of migrating to America and has sent him instead to a lonely and illiterate island. They arrive on the island in a gloomy state of fear and misery and hatred.

Skerratt, fundamentally, is a type that O'Flaherty has drawn many times before; the fierce, strong, impetuous type with the touch of nobility and the streak of weakness that brings his inevitable downfall.

It is curious that the O'Flaherty hero never survives and that he is invariably the victim of his own inherent weakness manifesting itself in some form such as sentimentality, madness, murder, lust or greed. He appears to be the victim of circumstances—of a ruthless succession of circumstances such as followed Gypo Nolan in *The Informer*

Books

Reviewed On This Page

THE WEAVER'S WEB. By J. Keighley Snowden (with a preface by the Rt. Hon. Viscount Snowden). (Cape. 7/6).

SKERRATT. By Liam O'Flaherty. (Gollancz. 7/6).

or of the oppressive adversity which repeatedly confronts Skerratt—but from first to last he is the foredoomed victim of the flaw in his own nature.

In Skerratt that flaw is pride. "Only for you," he cries to his wife bitterly, "I'd been in America now." He is proud of his great physical strength, he is proud that he can conquer the bitterness of his disappointment, he is proud because he can and will and does subdue the illiterate and barbarous islanders. He succeeds in what he attempts and glories in his success. He becomes for a time the idol of the islanders he has rescued from illiteracy and uncleanness—and his pride is fed.

His downfall begins with the death of his little son and the drunkenness of his grief-stricken wife.

A greater or lesser character might have survived these things, but not Skerratt. His pride has led him into a dispute, which deepens into a feud, with the island priest; fed by his own pride and the priest's jealousy and subtlety, that feud becomes ludicrous, bitter and finally catastrophic—for Skerratt. Once again he appears to be the victim of an accidental adversity, but the blow is in reality from within.

The story of Skerratt is a strong, zestful, and memorable piece of work, rich in colour and drama, fine in atmosphere, free from banality, insipidity and, most of all, from that superficiality of psychology and thought which characterise the novels of ladies of fashion and Parisian aesthetes of uncertain nationality.

One hesitates to describe "The Weaver's Web" as a novel. It is a brief chronicle of the life of a young Yorkshire weaver who, while poaching, shoots a man; he is in love and, fearing the consequences to the girl of the murder, breaks off with her; he is finally cleared; no more.

It is a simple, naïve story, yet it has a wild, sharp flavour, a strength and authenticity of atmosphere, a depth of sympathy and understanding of human nature and a unique raciness of style that give it the stature of true literature.

This book is forty years old, but though the conditions of the weavers themselves have changed, and the old-time poacher seems to be vanishing, it has not dated by a single minute. It lives on perhaps partly because of its love-story, partly because of the murder; these things have helped, no doubt, but what has given it endurance, and will possibly give it immortality, is its style, rugged and strong and dark as the Yorkshire hills themselves. It is like a whole book written by Joseph out of "Wuthering Heights."

This is the kind of style that rises straight from the earth. It smells, here, of the dark hillsides, swollen streams, wet woods, summer heather and harebell. It rises, at times, to sheer poetry—"the first bare flush of bluebells, the beseeching breath of small violets."

"Beseeching breath"! The book deserves to live for the heavenly perfection of that phrase alone.

THE ONLY WAY OUT

EMILE BURNS

Trenchant criticism of the 'solutions' and a concrete statement of the militant workers' policy.

Special workers' edition 1/- (1½d.)
also Cloth 2/6

History of the American Working Class 5 -

The Land without Unemployment. A picture sequence of the Five-Year Plan 5/- (paper)

Soviet's Fight for Disarmament 6d.

Roar China. Tretiakov's play on Imperialism 1/6 (paper)

You will also be interested in our Marxist Study Courses, Little Lenin Library & Marxist Library. Write for List.

MARTIN LAWRENCE
26 Bedford Row, London, W.C.1