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Fortnightly
or
Fortnightly
Review

UP AND DOWN THE COUNTRY

By H. E. BATES

POT LUCK IN ENGLAND, by Douglas Goldring. *Chapman & Hall.* 7s. 6d.

ENGLISH DOWNLAND, by H. J. Massingham. *Batsford.* 7s. 6d.

TANKARD TRAVELS, by Gordon Beccles. *Chapman & Hall.* 7s. 6d.

HISTORY IN THE OPEN AIR, by Henry John Randall. *Allen & Unwin.* 4s. 6d.

JUST over a year ago, in these pages, I made a plea for a book dealing not with the beauty of England, since such books were even then two for three ha'pence, but with its ugliness. Mr. Goldring's *Pot Luck in England* is as near being such a book as anything I have met since. In 1935, after some years in Sweden "and a too prolonged sojourn in the South of France," Mr. Goldring returned to England with a determination to settle down. Instead, he got bored—not with London, or his work, or his home, but with his suburb, with the Fulham Road. The result was that one day he jumped on a bus. It took him to Chelmsford. There he jumped on another. After that he jumped on another. Subsequently, without any pre-arrangement, he jumped on and off buses for several weeks, until finally he had covered a wide circle of Midland and Southern England, from London to East Anglia and the Derbyshire peaks down to Shrewsbury and Bath and the Quantocks and back to London. The result of it all is this book, a sort of contemporary *Rural Rides*, the record of a series of bus rides in modern England.

Like Cobbett, Mr. Goldring is a writer of candour and fearlessness. He is a

very hard hitter. He holds a theory, as I do, that love of one's country ought to be perfectly compatible with criticism of it. Thus, though he loves England—even *because* he loves England—he sees much in it to detest. As a traveller he is naturally much concerned with food and accommodation. When he began the journeys described in this book he had just returned from countries where such things were of paramount and vital importance. His disgust at finding an England full of ill-kept, unimaginative hotels, puritanically restricted public houses and the "alleged refreshment rooms of our railway companies" is therefore enormous. A country that can tolerate these things deserves, as he points out, to lose the bulk of its sensible travelling public to other and more sensible countries. In the course of his tour he stayed in over twenty inns and hotels, in various counties. All but one were bad. All were more or less expensive. He never overcame a feeling of trepidation when entering them, a "feeling that I had to explain myself and humbly by that he vouchsafed." Not once does he enthuse over an excellent meal or a regional dish or an inspired bottle. He records, as illustrating the cheerless and puritanical bondage under which the English traveller still exists, a story which deserves to be immortal: "I was in a pub the other day which displayed a notice: 'No music. No singing. *No Loud Laughing!*' Can you beat that?" He couldn't. He could confirm, in fact, the substance of its truth for himself.

So with towns. If a town is ugly he records it; he castigates it. He is no worshipper of accepted beauty spots. Nor, between praising and damning one thing and another, does he lose any opportunities for a little deviation into propaganda: war, peace, sanctions, the League of Nations, arms and the manufacturers of them, the craziness of mankind in general. He has some comments, not very illuminating and incidentally wrong in fact, on contemporary literature, and he introduces, now and then, a page or two of potted history. The book would, to my mind, have been better without all of these things. It is, even so, a highly entertaining and salutary chronicle.

Mr. Massingham belongs neither to that category nor to Mr. Goldring's. He is too constantly concerned with hard fact to be gushing; he is too tolerant and too Catholic to be whipped into anger. Also, in *English Downland*, in which he covers the whole of the English chalk from Dunstable to Dorchester and from Salisbury to Dover, he clearly has every inch of his work cut out, without deviations either into treacle-dipping or propaganda. His book is only 30,000 words in length, a fact of which he complains sadly, though to my mind this brevity makes the book doubly admirable. I am all for many photographs and much compactness. *English Downland* fulfils both conditions perfectly.

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Such books as this are not meant to be exhaustive; they should be stimulating verbal aphrodisiacs, kindling a warmer and fuller desire for scenes and places. Mr. Massingham is exactly at ease here. Never a lyrical writer, he hovers between fact and enthusiasm in such a way as to create at once an effect of solidity and allurements. He satisfies and stimulates. One longs to go in actuality almost everywhere he takes one in print; all up and down the Chilterns and over the Berkshire Downs and into Wiltshire and Dorset and back through Sussex and Kent; which is the only true test of any book of travelling whatsoever.

In contrast, I have no desire to accompany Mr. Gordon Beccles. His book purports to be a collection of short stories—which it is not—inspired by a journey up and down England and a chance meeting with an elderly English gentleman in a Devonshire inn. Actually it is nothing more than a series of newspaper articles sewn together to make a book. In Fleet Street Mr. Beccles has the reputation of being brilliant. This book makes him appear tenth-rate. It is all very slick, dishonest and even sloppy. These stories, the records of eavesdroppings in odd places in Yorkshire, Cardiff, Cumberland, in pubs, harbours, railway stations and so on, are not stories at all. They are not even anecdotes. They are simply samples of Daily Expressionism.

If Mr. Beccles, or indeed anyone else, should doubt that *Tanhard Travels* is imitation stuff, let him get *History in the Open Air*. This is a genuine, concise, first-rate reconstruction of that history of England which is written on the map of England "in letters of earth and stone, of bank and ditch, of foliage and crop." There is no slickness here. Everyone of these 150 odd pages is at once authoritative, brief and fascinating. Let Mr. Beccles read it and, like me, take off his hat.