

De Reszke of course!



DR 274-74

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R. M. Hardy,
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BOOKS

"WORKMANLIKE VERSE"

THE GARDEN. By V. Sackville-West.
(Michael Joseph Ltd., London).

(Reviewed by Basil Dowling)

EDGAR ALLAN POE maintains in one of his essays that there is no such thing as a long poem, because the degree of elevating excitement which makes the value of a poem cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. "After a lapse of half-an-hour at the very utmost," he says, "it flags, fails, a revulsion ensues, and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer a poem."

This is an evident exaggeration, but rightly stresses the extreme difficulty of writing a successful long poem, especially one upon so slight a theme as a garden. But Miss Sackville-West achieved the difficult in her long poem *The Land*, and she has done it a second time with *The Garden*. Apparently unsubstantial as her subjects are, she succeeds in getting an effect of beauty and dignity by letting her imagination dwell long and lovingly on subjects that please her; by "the steady pressing down of the stamp upon the wax." Not that she always avoids the flagging line or passage. There are, in her new poem, lines as flat as this: "Yet do I find it difficult indeed." And there are, inevitably, periods of lapse and fatigue. But for the most part the reader is borne along very agreeably with the slow-moving thought, and frequently lifted to noble heights of enchanted vision.

"These lines, these modest lines, almost demure" (to use the poet's own words) are at their best when describing flowers. Wallflowers

Bronze as a pheasant, ruby as old wine
Held up against the light.

Winter-sweet

against a sheltering wall,
Waxen, Chinese, and drooping bell.

The peony "as blowsy as a strumpet,"
yellow lupins

As full of honey as the laden bees

Powdered with pollen on their Ethiop
thighs.

June roses, poppies, zinnias — all the flowers, common and uncommon, are here; the tiny creatures of the garden, too; the lady-bird "so neat in oval spotted carapace," and the snail "brittle as biscuit on the garden path." All are seen with an eye more minutely observant than that of any other living English poet, except perhaps Andrew Young. The whole poem is an affectionate catalogue of garden pleasures enjoyed under the shadow of world catastrophe. The poet is no sentimentalist—she is keenly aware (as in *The Land*) of the hostility as well as the friendliness of Nature, but can still find something to praise even in the marauding wasp, the "little Satan in his black and gold." For, she declares, "small pleasures must correct great tragedies." How fitly her fine workmanlike verse describes the homely skills and seasonal rites which make the prosperous garden

—waiting for the right weather, pruning, preparing the soil, sowing; then the rewards when

Come crowding all the chaste
And adolescent children of the Spring.

The Garden is an unassuming work, but aliveness in poetry is an incalculable thing, and a few lines about a gooseberry tart may endure longer than many a portentous Ode to the Universe. And so I venture a prophecy that this poem, and its companion *The Land*, with their satisfying plainness, will outlast the smart and complicated fashion of much modern verse. But be this as it may, we can be thankful for the poet's calm insistence on simple, natural things and feelings in these bad times, and her comforting reminder that these (as Hardy wrote)

..... will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

A COUNTY MAN

AMURI COUNTY: OLD TIMES and OLD PEOPLE. By L. R. C. Macfarlane. Printed for the Author by Whitcombe & Tombs.

YOU will enjoy this book once you accept the fact that the author can neither spell, punctuate, paragraph, nor obey the laws of syntax. Life, you can hear him saying, is far too short for worries like those, and such a life as he has been privileged to lead, far too sweet. So he just plunges into his story, taking neither it nor himself too seriously, and carries you through three generations and several hundred square miles of territory whether you wish to go with him or not. But you, of course, do wish. What can you do with a guide who keeps saying things like these to you?

Now we enter Mackenzie itself. A village of many promises in its early days, when all incomings and outgoings were via Port Robinson, a few miles down the Jed river. The village had all the local trade and a journey to Christchurch via coach or one's own horse vehicle was quite an event in one's life. It had its own paper—its own earthquake, which, by the way, upset, among many other things, some of the type of the paper, and ever after one column was blessed with a definite squint. But, try as it would, it did not have its own hotel. It built a building two stories—public bar, private bar and all the rest in the best corner pub tradition, and, in fact, had everything, except that bit of blue paper saying it had the right to sell spirits and malted liquors. Afterwards, in desperation, it burnt itself down. . . .

Cheviot has contributed somewhat to the political history of New Zealand. A daughter of the Hon. William Robinson married Sir Francis Bell, for so many years a political leader of great character and foresight. The Hon. George Forbes was an original settler, and, besides being Prime Minister, represented the district for 35 years. Again, Andrew Rutherford, another local M.P., will go down in history as the only member who always saw the funny side of politics from both sides of the House, at one and the same time. . . .

On one occasion, when he was out in the back with his wagon, Fowler broke his leg above the ankle. All sorts of suggestions were made by his companions as to what to do. He solved the situation by driving his wagon over to Hamner over a track that was a caricature of a road. Reaching Hamner the day after the doctor had been there on his weekly visit, he said that he could not wait a week for the doctor and, a day or so after, drove his team into the ranges. His leg was never officially mended, but he got along very well for the rest of his life. . . .

The Culverden Hotel is about the one and only North Canterbury hotel that no one has thought of burning down. It has, of course, been added to. At one time it had no porch and the wind used to blow the froth off the beer in the bar. The first