

Increasing Understanding

EXPLORATIONS. By L. C. Knights. (Chatto and Windus).
(Reviewed by David Hall)

THE explorers of deserts and mountains are flamboyant figures; so too are those who penetrate the jungles of some vast land-mass or who chart the icy regions of the Poles. Mr. Knights is another type of explorer. With rope and lantern he follows, no less determinedly, the line of his quest deep underground and brings us back news of antres vast long hidden in the entrails of the familiar earth.

These critical essays are written with an almost painful integrity. L. C. Knights scrutinises his subjects with a care that would be debilitating if it were not supported by a rich emotional response to their enduring quality. "At the present time especially it seems necessary to remind ourselves that works of literature . . . are only kept alive by being possessed by individuals as intimate parts of their own living experience." Reading is, therefore, exploration, but exploration not only of literature but simultaneously of the reader's own mind.

Four of these essays deal with Shakespeare. Mr. Knights's consideration of Macbeth as "a statement of evil" which "also happens to be poetry" is individual and interesting. Shakespeare is exonerated from having sympathised too uncritically with Hamlet. Elsewhere Mr. Knights points out the dangers of an approach, especially to *Hamlet*, concentrating on events and character rather than on the poetry of the play. It would, I think, be fair to sum up L. C. Knights's attitude to that vast vested interest, Shakespearean scholarship, as being that it can equip the reader with a lot of valuable information, but that its efforts at real criticism have generally been feeble and irrelevant.

There is an excellent study of the poetry of George Herbert, and another which is iconoclastic in its view of Restoration Comedy, whose mere naughtiness has always, for many, been a somewhat uncritical recommendation. "The criticism that defenders of Restoration Comedy need to answer is not that the comedies are 'immoral,' but that they are trivial, gross, and dull." Mr. Knights writes well of the novels of Henry James, and his estimate of the qualities and status as a poet of W. B.

Yeats is generous and fair, though I do not personally agree with his judgment on Yeats's "poetic career as a whole" as being "an heroic failure," perhaps because I am indifferent to Yeats's political outlook and do not so exclusively admire the few particular poems which Mr. Knights selects for ungrudging approval.

IN the last essay in this book L. C. Knights descends from the rostrum of his specialty to discuss some of the broader aspects of university teaching, and advocates a closer correlation of the study of English and History. His dislike of excessive specialisation is, I believe, well founded. It is an interesting commentary on his suggestion for the setting up a school of "cultural history" that more than 20 years ago his own university, Cambridge, wrote into the prescriptions for its honours course in English "life and thought" in addition to literature. But the attempt to add historical background to the study of literary texts, made fumblingly and perhaps unwillingly by dons whose training was purely literary, remained a good intention and went no further than the inclusion in examination papers of some questions on disconnected historical topics with plenty of alternatives to release candidates who preferred to specialise in literature. Trevelyan's English *Social History* makes one wonder whether this approach to literature might not have

been handled more profitably by delivering up the school of English to the historians.

Mr. Knights bids us, with firmness as well as modesty, go back to the source of his criticism, the works themselves, and study their "primary impact" on our sensibility. This is a refreshingly honest attitude for a critic to adopt. It reminds me of a spirited stanza I have been vainly trying to remember, about how Shakespeare would have fared if he had been confronted with an examination on his own works. It ended something like this:

Shakespeare would have done very badly
Because he hadn't read his Bradley.

It is unfortunately true that the student who knows what the critics say will always do better than the poor fool who reads only the great originals with a sincere and open mind.

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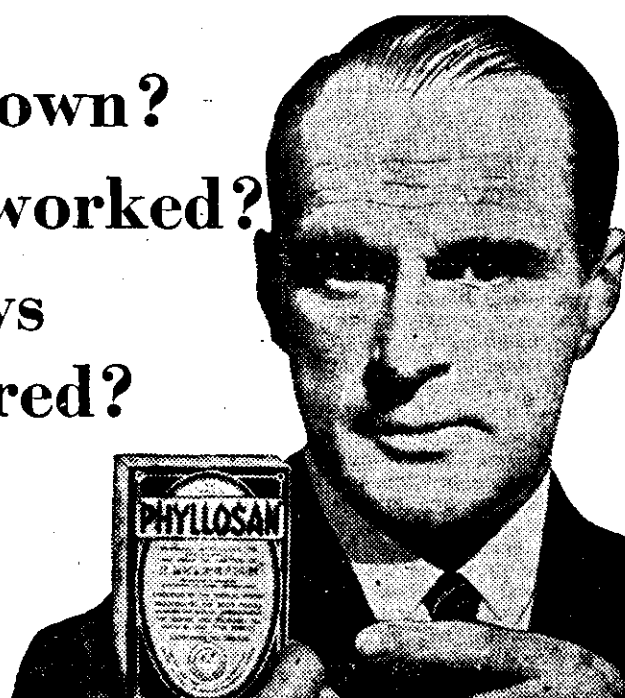


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