

The Wit and Wisdom Of Max O'Rell

WIT and humour, it has been said, date more than any other form of writing. Some reservations must be made to the statement. Leaving out the old accepted classics in this field, there is Anstey's *Vice Versa*, still alive, and Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*, which that serious-minded writer never lived down. It continues to be popular, and it is quite likely that our great-grandchildren will be reading it. Maybe it will be the same with the Grossmiths' *Diary of a Nobody*, which more than one good judge has rated as one of the great books of our time. Yet "Mr. Dooley," the American satirist whom all the world was reading 50 years ago, is forgotten and his books out of print, and even minor classics like Artemus Ward and Max Adeler are hard to come by.

I thought of this when the other day I was browsing through a list of New Zealand centenarians in 1948 and came upon this: "Another celebrity born in 1848 (March 2) was Paul Blouet, a French writer who was known as Max O'Rell, and who settled in England. In the early 'nineties he visited New Zealand on a lecturing tour." Only people of about my age remember

Max O'Rell, but 50 years or more ago he was as well known as Stephen Leacock was a generation later. This wise and witty Frenchman who went to live in England, taught in English schools, and married an Englishwoman, established himself as for many years the leading interpreter of Britain and the British, at home and oversea. He lacked the subtlety and literary grace of the later André Maurois, but he was lively, observant, penetrating, and at once critical and sympathetic.

Such books as Max O'Rell's *John Bull and His Island* and *John Bull & Co.* disappear because, so I take it, the conditions they describe largely change. In some respects late Victorian England seems as far away as the Regency or Charles II. Similarly "Mr. Dooley's" observations on current events, so very original and funny at the time, are dated to-day by that very currency. Only 50 years ago, he could raise a laugh by saying that when you played golf you began by asking your opponent if he knew the Prince of Wales. If he didn't and you did, that counted you one. It's a far cry from this to Walter Hagen and later champions, and the overwhelming of Britain in this ancient game. On the other hand, human nature on holiday, as in *Three Men in a Boat*, doesn't change, and Mr. Pooter, the central figure in *The Diary of a Nobody*, is one of the world's fools.

Yet there is pleasure and profit to be got from dipping into these forgotten humorists, and there is a lot of fun and

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wisdom in Max O'Rell. Take his little book, *Drat the Boys*, which tells of his arrival in England, after fighting the Germans and being wounded in the Paris Commune, and how he encountered landladies and took to teaching. There was nothing of the comic French master of tradition in Paul Blouet. It would have been a smart English boy indeed who got the better of this understanding Frenchman.

Anticipating Stephen Leacock's treatment of translation from the Greek,



AN AUSTRALIAN bush station—an illustration from O'Rell's book "John Bull & Co."

here is Max O'Rell on schoolboy handling of French:

English boys have invented a special kind of English for French translation. It is not the English they use with their classical and other masters (here I think these masters might demur); it is not the English they use at home with their parents, or at school with their comrades; it is a special article kept for the sole benefit of their French masters. The good genius boy will translate "Oui, mon père" by "Yes, my father," as if it were possible for him to forget that he calls his papa "father," and not "my father" when he addresses him. He very seldom reads over his translation to ascertain that it reads like English; but when he does, and is not particularly satisfied with the result, he lays the blame on the French original. After all, it is not his fault if there is no sense in the French, and he brings a certain number of English dictionary words placed one after the other, the whole entitled *French*. Of course he could not call it *English*, and he dared not call it *Nonsense*. He calls it *French*, and relieves his conscience.

The finest piece of French prose in existence is undoubtedly the following sentence, taken from Bossuet's funeral oration on the Great Condé: "Restait cette redoutable infanterie de l'armée d'Espagne, dont les gros bataillons serrés, semblables à autant de tours, mais à des tours qui sauraient réparer leurs brèches, demeuraient inébranlables au milieu de tout le reste en déroute, et lançaient des feux de toutes parts."

This reads like a chant of Homer, does it not? It reads quite differently in boys' translations, I assure you, when you come to "towers that would be able to mend their breaches." This confirms you in your belief that nothing improves by translation—except a bishop.

I wonder if the last sentence was original. If it was, it is enough to merit him immortality.

(continued on next page)

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