

TRUBY KING

TRUBY KING THE MAN. By Mary King. Allen and Unwin.

WERE it permissible to divide biographers arbitrarily into two classes, I should classify as professionals those authors who dissect with passionless objectivity a subject personally unknown to them, drawing their information almost entirely from documents, and, as amateurs, writers of the Boswell, Eckermann, Festing Jones variety, whose impressions were formed during long years of intimacy. *Truby King The Man*, by Mary King, his adopted daughter, an amateur according to my somewhat irresponsible classification, is an excellent example of the intimate biography—the story of a human being rather than the mere history of a career.

"Fifty years hence, what will the rising generation know of Truby King?" demands the author. The answer, I suggest, will occur readily enough to anyone who reads this book. The rising generation will have the advantage of their fathers, who merely knew Truby King in his old age as founder of the Plunket Society, a uniquely arresting figure whose fame justified his eccentricity. He had become a law unto himself—almost a national institution—and as such he was accepted. It had long been forgotten that he was once the most brilliant medical student of his day at Edinburgh University. The fact that, as Superintendent of Seaclyff Mental Hospital, he had made revolutionary changes in methods of treating the insane, was scarcely remembered. He had long outlived the heyday of achievement. A great reputation remained, but a reputation which the existing generation were content to accept without being unduly curious as to how it had been earned.

The evolutionary current of Truby King's mind ran so smoothly, his conclusions seem so obvious, that one is apt to depreciate the fertility of his expedience. The obstacles to achievement gave way so inevitably before his determined assaults that success appears a foregone conclusion. A serious young man who afterwards grew to be a zealot, he carried about him from the first every promise of future distinction—outstanding intellect, unusual power of concentration, even the poor constitution which, in men of his stamp, seems rather to

stimulate than check ambition. The author might easily have lost herself in the toils of his single-mindedness, or wearied us with the tale of almost unbroken success, but instead she has leavened her narrative at each doubtful turn with the variety of incident, both tragic and comic, that accumulated round every aspect of his life. Excessive earnestness and a sense of humour are seldom compatible, but King managed to preserve both. "I do miss the insane," he remarked when his hopelessly erratic habits had made the domestic situation acute. (The mental patients at Seaclyff had been more accommodating.) "If you cut down one tree I'll turn the whole Refractory Ward on to you," was the threat used to some Public Works employees who had come to fell some bluegums near the hospital. His love for flowers and gardens remained, even after the cause had become an obsession. "The main purpose of good gardening is the perfect rearing and growth of our fellow beings, called plants, with a view to direct utility or beauty, or both." His wife and daughter were caught up in the whirlwind of activity in which his days were passed. Neither were spared from unremitting toil on behalf of the cause, but both retained his undying affection. "It is you who make it all bright for us, and only you who can make Seaclyff or anywhere else home for me," he wrote after 18 years of marriage to a wife who took little thought of clothes or personal appearance. "Do see if you can get Bella to buy another hat," were his last words to his lawyer before leaving New Zealand on a later occasion.

But there is no further space for quotation. It remains to be said that the author of this book has dealt most skilfully with the material at her disposal, presenting it in a delightfully variable form. Some chapters are composed entirely of letters written either by Sir Truby or Lady King. One is given up to the murder trial of a paranoiac; another to the views of King on the proper treatment of inebriates. Yet another reverts to the present tense and describes a typical day in King's life at Seaclyff. Here and there the narrative seems to halt and lose itself in diversionary details. One becomes impatient to return to the story of King himself; but this is a trifling fault in a work which surely deserves a high place in this country's literature. Finally, in case I have not made clear the full extent of my appreciation, let me do so now without reserve. If other biographies of New Zealanders comparable with this one have been written they have so far escaped my notice.

—R. M. Burdon

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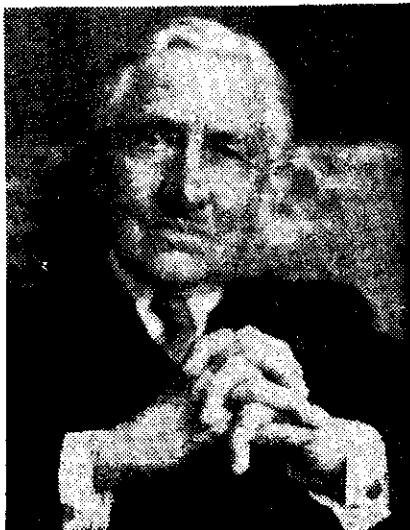
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