

## BOOKS

# Blood and Thunder

BOYS WILL BE BOYS. By E. S. Turner.  
Michael Joseph, London.

WHATEVER their faults, "penny dreadfuls" were works of vivid imagination: both J. M. Barrie and H. G. Wells have claimed that for them. Although they have been the butt of critics from the Victorian *Quarterly Review* to George Orwell, their defendants, equally vocal, have ranged from Samuel Johnson (in principle anyway) to G. K. Chesterton. Now here at last is a sympathetic, thoroughly documented, brightly written story of their development, from Sweeney Todd the Demon Barber of Fleet Street (whose victims of 1840 were made into delicious meat pies) to Dick Barton, the BBC's radio detective who never swears, never breaks the law, and defends himself only with a swift uppercut to the jaw.

*Boys Will be Boys* is the story of a nation's boyhood reading. Spring-Heeled-Jack, Varney the Vampire, The Blue Dwarf, Dick Turpin, Jack Harkaway, Sexton Blake, Nick Carter, Nelson Lee, Falcon Swift, Buffalo Bill, Deadwood Dick, Billy Bunter—what amazing reading our youth held! Here are chronicled the stories of iron men on the prairies, of weekly invasions of Britain by Germans, French, or Russians, of visits to lost civilisations in the Antarctic or the Sahara, and of journeys by space-ship to Mars. And here is an account of the sporting yarns that have ranged through *Champion*, *Rover*, *B.O.P.* and other boys' papers of a past era, in which with unflagging regularity the lemons were poisoned at half-time, masked forwards appeared to score a last-minute try, and bogus referees blew poisoned darts at the star players.

This is not just a tale of fictional characters, however, but of the men who wrote and published them—Charles Hamilton, who wrote Billy Bunter stories for 30 years at the rate of a million and a-half words a year, or Lord Northcliffe, who founded his journalistic empire on the halfpenny papers with which he attacked and eventually destroyed the "penny dreadful." The author recalls the fantastic competitions used to boost sales—one which drew 700,000 entries invited readers to estimate the amount of bullion in the Bank of England, the prize being "£1 a week for life"—and the fascinating advertisements for daisy air rifles, singing scarf pins, shocking electric coils, solaphones, tuboglidors, and stink bombs, which lined the pages of these publications.

The book is written with tremendous gusto. There are plenty of chances to be sententious in the investigation of this literary half-world, but the author is too deeply engaged in his subject to moralise.

—P.J.W.

## HE HATED SHEEP

SAMUEL BUTLER, 1835-1902. By P. N. Furbank. Cambridge University Press.

THIS short critical study by a young English scholar sets out to rehabilitate Butler and rebut the attack upon him in Malcolm Muggeridge's *The Earnest Atheist*. Furbank believes that



SEXTON BLAKE—1930 model

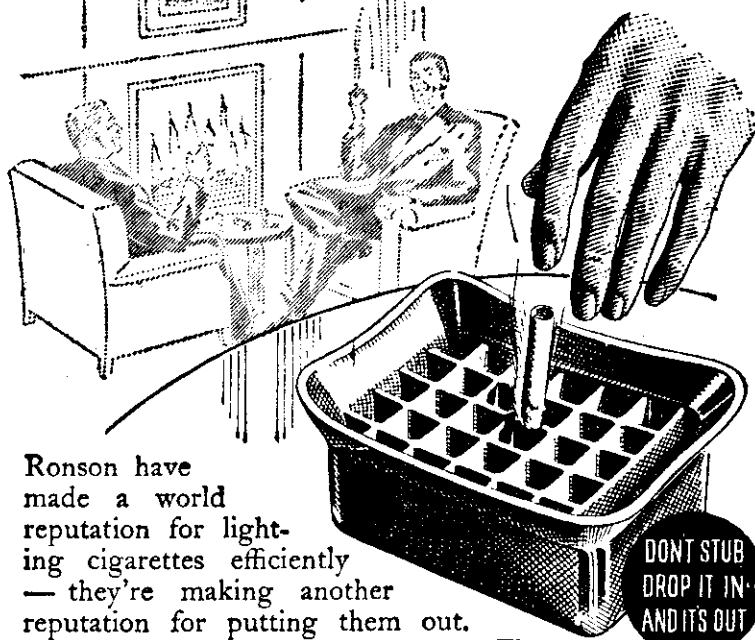
Butler's life must be seen not as "a prolonged, unsuccessful quarrel between two halves of a discordant nature, but as a violent, devastating and comparatively short battle in early manhood, from which he emerged in some ways immensely strengthened, though in others irretrievably scarred, crippled and benumbed." The book is critical and balanced, an excellent reassessment of the present literary standing of Samuel Butler, reinforced by many apt quotations from his writings.

Butler's crotchets are placed under a searching and at times rather austere scrutiny. His childish possessiveness, which induced him to "adopt" a few musicians, writers or painters—Handel, Giovanni Bellini, and Holbein—and reject all others, is admirably sketched. The amusing and amused Miss Savage is put in better perspective, and Butler's armed attitude to her derided as "a sort of comic bachelor's conviction that fun and easy friendliness and wit on a spinster's part can only be a superior sort of husband-hunting." Possibly we owe *The Way of All Flesh* to her encouragement, for it did not, like *Erewhon*, come to him and insist on being written.

Furbank finds interesting parallels between Butler's *Erewhon Revisited*, Lytton's *The Coming Race*, and Morris's *News from Nowhere*. He re-examines Mrs. R. S. Garnett's *Samuel Butler and his Family Relations* and finds that it does not achieve its respectable purpose of proving that the Butlers were not as nasty as Samuel thought them.

Gold is where you find it, and Mr. Furbank's last chapter, on the Butler Collection, is surprisingly fresh and significant. He regards Butler's residence in New Zealand as exhibiting his first achievement of independence and "the beginnings of those tenacious orthodoxies within which he was to take refuge." He quotes J. B. Yeats (the painter-brother of the poet), his fellow art student in the years immediately after Butler's return to England: "He liked to tell of his New Zealand life, and of his hatred of sheep. They were always getting lost . . ." Butler too was lost, in his own England, just as Oscar Wilde was (continued on next page)

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