

BOOKS

Of Plays and Players

SHADOW OF THE VINE. A Play in Three Acts. By Beverley Nichols. Jonathan Cape.
SEE THE PLAYERS. By Maud Gill. George Ronald.

WRITINGS ON ELIZABETHAN DRAMA. By J. Le Gay Brereton. Collected by R. G. Howarth and published by Melbourne University Press.

(Reviewed by Isobel Andrews)

THE only thing that binds these three books together is their connection with the stage. Within that boundary they are as different as chalk from cheese, David from Goliath—or Tod Slaughter from Henry Irvine. It is a very far cry indeed from Beverley Nichols to Marlowe, and it remains to be seen if one small voice can bridge the gap.

Shadow of the Vine is a three-act play all about the Horrors of Drink. Its main idea, as far as I can make out, is that once alcohol is in the blood, it stays there, even unto the third and fourth generation—a thesis which I can't and won't accept from anyone. The Heath family lives in a house built about 1835 which has a certain faded elegance and a Regency staircase. Julian is 19 and a composer of some brilliance. We know this by the number of times he sits at the piano, strikes a chord, and writes notes on a sheet of manuscript. Arthur is the other brother—I forget what he does—but both hate their father, who is a dipsomaniac. Mrs. Heath is a beautiful woman with a beautiful nature. The play is highly dramatic and when the brothers get really wrought up they swear, and we can't help feeling "How daring." They are, you see, Edwardians. To lighten things up a bit, comedy lines are introduced such as, "Oh, go into the garden and eat worms," and quick as a flash comes the answer, "I can't, I've eaten them all."

One could go on and on, but it's too easy—and could become cheap. I am fully aware of the terrors and problems of dipsomania, and am in favour of open discussion of the theme. But not here. Not by Mr. Nichols. The blurb on the jacket says, "It . . . glosses over no ugly facts and though it has pity, it offers little hope. Perhaps for those reasons no commercial theatre has yet ventured to present it to the public." I can think of another reason.

The second edition of Maud Gill's book *See the Players* is published 10 years after the first. It is as pleasant to re-read as it was to discover. As a rule, men and women who have convulsed or delighted audiences by the waggish lift of an eyebrow or the significant gesture of a hand, fail to convey any essence of their personalities when they try to write. Instead, they lapse into a series of banal and often incredibly naive anecdotes

which do not hang together in any way and are often buried under a perfect hailstorm of exclamation marks. Miss Gill, although quite fond of the exclamation mark herself, uses it with far more discretion. She has an endearing sense of the ridiculous, an orderly and well-balanced mind and a real flair for writing which has produced a book of theatrical reminiscences which is also a narrative and an enlightening human document. Her own personality, without any undue forcing, comes through very nicely, and although she is as sentimental as the next over the theatre, she tempers her enthusiasm with a down-to-earth realism which makes good and informative reading. One can quarrel with her mainly about the things she leaves out. She meets people in her youth who are "now well-known figures on the stage," but gives no clue to identity, and this can be quite frustrating to the reader who wants to be told all.

Maud Gill is on her own admission a comparatively unknown actress. This is apparently due more to her own choice than through any lack of ability or opportunity. "There are," she says, "so many pleasant things in life which get in the way of one's concentrating on any one department of it." She is now appearing in "old hag" parts in English films and is quite happy to do so. When she began such roles she had to wear a wig and heavy make-up. She still needs a wig, but the make-up gets lighter each year. She will, she thinks, still be suitable for "old hag" parts when she can step into the studio and play as she is, so that the advancing years hold no terrors for her.

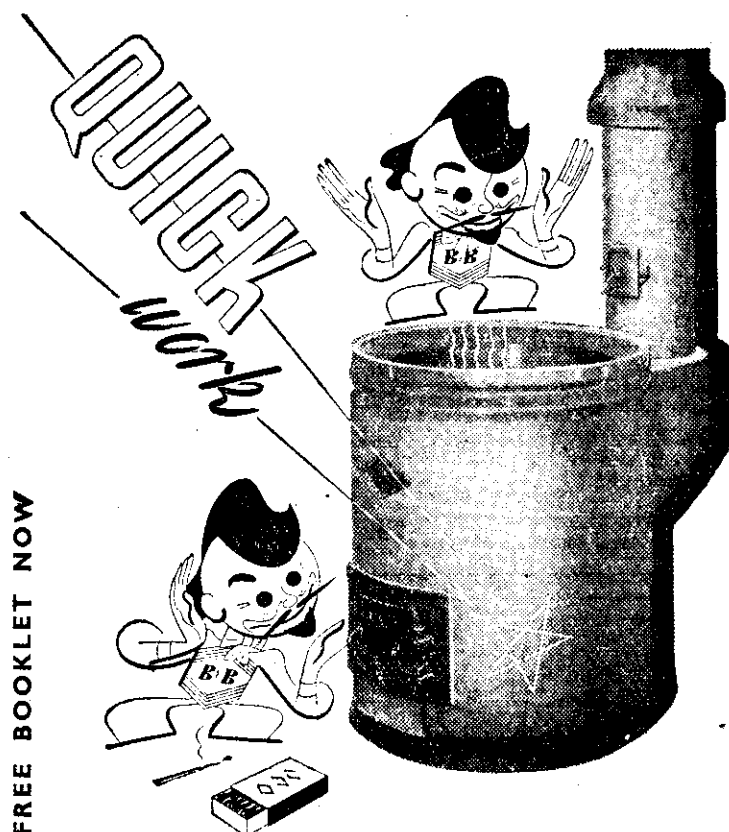
The book can be recommended to anyone who is interested in either the history or the gossip of the stage. And those who have no such definite interest will still find it an agreeable and entertaining companion.

J. Le Gay Brereton, author of *Writings on Elizabethan Drama*, died in 1933 while Professor of English Literature in the University of Sydney. He has written a formidable list of books and pamphlets on the Elizabethan drama, but academic studies absorbed him too much and this present volume is the first work to be published since 1909.

Norman Carter's portrait shows a high, benevolent forehead, clear, forward-looking eyes, and a mouth pursed in a half-smile. The portrait fits in with the writings, which are a collection of essays, analyses and notes, wide in scope and interest, deep in sympathy and insight with, all the while, a sense of fun which bubbles up every now and again through the clear waters of scholarly erudition.

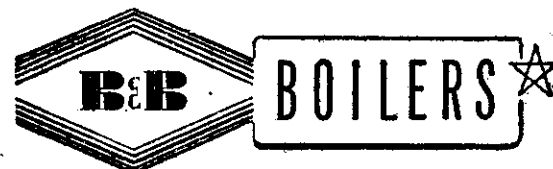
The book is a labour of love, edited (continued on next page)

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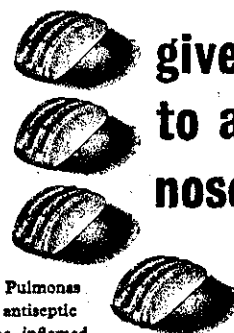
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