

TWO MODERN TROUBADOURS

Rayner Sisters Revive A Lost Art

There arrived here from Australia the week before last two young New Zealanders who describe themselves as Strolling Players and who are exponents of the ancient and almost forgotten art of the troubadour. They are Joan and Betty Rayner and though they are still young people they have charmed audiences in Australia, the United States and Canada, Great Britain, France and Scandinavia with the unusual old-world freshness of their performances. Unfortunately, the speed of their "strolling" is not exactly medieval and they had hardly landed here before they had to be off again to keep faith with their friends in the United States. They were heard, however, from 1YA last week and the week before.

WHEN The Listener interviewed Joan and Betty Rayner last week, it was found that interviewing Joan and Betty Rayner is not altogether an easy business, unless one is prepared to listen to, rather than record the conversation, because, once they get started, the ball of reminiscence flies back and forth continually and one finds oneself almost watching it and following stroke and return like the Wimbledon crowds in the newsreels.

And the Rayner girls are worth listening to. Even if they were talking of trivialities they have such enormous zest and such unflagging good spirits that they could make the commonplace romantic and intriguing. But, of course, they have a boundless store of anecdote and in consequence they are both as entertaining in a hotel sitting room as they are on the stage or before the microphone.

Enthusiastic Workers

Few people, it would seem, are so happy in their vocation as they. Their work is their recreation and, one gathers, the more they stroll and play, the more friends they make—in all sorts of out-of-the-way corners of the world—and the more pleasure they find.

Joan explained briefly how they gathered material for their programmes. European and American folk-lore and folk-songs were what they searched for, and to find them they had travelled in the hills of Kentucky, the pine-woods of Nova Scotia and the islands of Canada's Atlantic sea-board, the highlands of Scandinavia, through France and other parts of Europe.

Not Antiquarians

She drew a distinction between their work and that of the enthusiasts who set out to get down in black and white the words and music of traditional folk-songs lest they passed into oblivion. Most of the songs and stories which she and her sister used could be traced through museum or library research. Some, for example, they had found printed in old "broad-sides" in a manuscript room at the British Museum. Again, they regarded the songs they sought from the point of view of entertainers and not antiquarians, and there

was always the fact to remember that the language of many of these old songs was not always such as would appeal to a modern audience.

Interesting People

Half of the charm of their work, said the sisters, was to be found in the interesting people which they met in their wanderings. There was one old woman in Kentucky, for example, who sang many songs for them and who, when they left her, promised to write to them. And she did. The first letter was a very restrained one beginning "Dear Misses Rayner . . ." but her second was markedly more spontaneous, and when the third arrived it began, without more ado, "Dear Children . . ."

Similar warm-heartedness they had encountered wherever they went. They spoke of their visit to Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island, where the Gaelic persists if anything even more vigorously than in the homeland of Scotland. There, said Joan, they had spoken to young children who could not speak a word of English.

Language difficulties had, of course, their funny side, she went on. There was, for example, their trip to Sweden. When they landed there, neither of them knew half-a-dozen words of the language and since they travelled everywhere by caravan and generally fended for themselves this was something of an obstacle. But it was only a minor obstacle to seasoned strollers, who were experts in mime and gesture, too, and when Joan impersonated a hen for the benefit of the village storekeeper, eggs were forthcoming immediately.

Intimacy of Radio

They had both been happy to find in radio work an intimacy between performer and audience which was lacking in stage work and both in Australia and New Zealand they had found much enjoyment and entertainment in "fan mail." One Australian listener informed them that their names had been given to two horses and after their last Auckland broadcast, last week, they learned that another listener had named two new crocuses "Joan and Betty Rayner."

Of all the countries they have visited they were most impressed by the United States which appeared to them as a vast "seed-bed of art" from which rich fruit would come in the future. There every encouragement was given



THE RAYNERS: Betty is on the left and Joan on the right. They call this photograph their "trade-mark"

to the child to develop his or her artistic faculty. It was true that not everyone could "arrive" artistically—many singers, for example, had met with disappointment for in certain branches of music the competition was so keen that only the finest artists could hope for success, but from what they had seen of United States educational practice there was no stinting of the finance necessary to encourage children to develop artistically.

Knowledge of New Zealand

Among the American people they had met they were surprised to find how much was known of New Zealand. Some of their friends in New York, it was true, had twitted them with the remark that before they arrived on the scene New Zealand was known to Americans only as the home of the Maoris and Katherine Mansfield, but a knowledge of their homeland was surprisingly general in the United States. An astonishing number of Americans seemed to have visited New Zealand and the sisters believed that more would do so were it not that most Americans have their long vacation during New Zealand's winter. And if Americans disliked anything it was the cold. At the same time neither the men nor the women were fond of wearing "winter woollies" which spoiled their shape, relying instead on their efficient domestic central heating systems—which were not very common in New Zealand.

This reminded Joan of an amusing remark made by a New Zealand woman who had spent six years in the United States and there assimilated much of the American outlook. She had returned to New Zealand in the "in-between" season, before the chills of winter had given way entirely to summer sunshine and warmth and in consequence clothes were at the "in-between" stage, too. Referring to a certain lack of "line" in the outfits she had seen in Queen Street, Auckland, the expatriate remarked that it looked as if they "had been cut out in the dark and made up in a fog."

American Humour

The remark, which was made quite without malice, was itself indicative of

the woman's stay in the United States, for the humour of the description was typically American. And both the Rayner girls find American humour—the 100 per cent. American variety—wholly delightful. On the other hand, they think that Australians have the quickest sense of humour, while they find New Zealand humour is more appreciative than creative.



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