

THE OTHER INDIA

Written for "The Listener"
by A.M.R.

WE call it "The Dutch East Indies." Its few nationally conscious natives insist on "Indonesia." Far Eastern merchants abbreviate to "D.E.I." But the Dutch say simply "India" (they spell it Indie) and casually dismiss the Brightest Jewel in the British Crown as merely "British India" or "Hither India."

And they are not altogether wrong. "The Hon. John Co." or British East India Company, whose private servants it was who brought India (our India) into the British orbit, was originally founded to exploit these islands, and only turned to the continental Hindustan as "the leavings" when it could not push its way past Dutch cannon into "the pickings," Island Ind itself. It is we who are mistaken—we who vaguely picture the Dutch Indies as a group of jungly islands inhabited by crocodiles, snakes, and "wild men of Borneo" (confused half with *Orang Outans*—"Wild Men of the woods"—and half with naked Papuans with bones through nose and ears).

Maps Are Misleading

For actually here is an island world in itself—a Milky Way of archipelago beyond archipelago, as long west to east as from Ireland to India, and wide north to south as from Norway to Africa. (It is our habit of studying world geography on Mercator Projection maps that misleads us as to its extent.) And while

"The East Indies have remained right up to now very much on the twilight edges of our consciousness, a world of their own within a world not interested in them"

most of the thousands of islands are, naturally, small—in many cases being mere cricket ovals of blinding white coral-sand set in cool white rings of foam—some of them are enormous. Borneo aspires with Nieu Guinea ("Nee-oo Hchinaya" the Dutch pronounce it) to be the largest island in the world. And Sumatra is not far behind. Then while, indeed, there are men in their woods who wander in droves with hardly more tools or habitations than the tigers and rhinoceroses around them, there is also, in one jungle, a monument that was thought to be a hill until it was cleared. Larger than any pyramid except the Great Pyramid, it is a far greater human feat than any of them. For it is terraced on a complicated plan with hundreds of monks' cells and stone statues and is inscribed with two miles of elaborate bas-reliefs. Moreover the civilisation that wrought it is not dead. Never publicised in the schools of the West, as, for example, the extinct civilisations of the Aztecs and Incas have been, it lives on to-day in Java more ancient and hardly less distinctive. And on Bali alongside you may walk into the

India into which the Buddha was born six hundred years before Christ.

In The Twilight

The East Indies, in short, have remained right up to now very much on the twilight edges of our consciousness, a world of their own within a world not interested in them. Their contact with Europe has been practically confined to pumping a continuous stream of tropical products (including dividends) out to dinner tables and factories and Dutch pockets, and to accepting in return, often with surly bad grace, a super-efficient administration and occasional spoil-sport gunboats nosing into inter-island piracy. And they have held a world of variety within their own self-sufficiency. I remember at the Batavia University picking out the races among the students. They graduated in type eastwards from stocky, independent, intellectual *Orang Batak* of the Sumatran Highlands, whose cannibal grandfathers beat the world's chess champions, to natives of what the Dutch call "The Greater East," whose features approximated to loose, irregular Australian "Abo" and black, frizzy,

loose-lipped Papuan. And in between, in geographical situation, were the smooth quiet brown faces, the straight glossy heads, the slight ankles and tiny graceful hands of delicate dreaming *Orang Java*, perhaps the most beautiful race in the world.

The social conditions those students variously came from were yet more diverse. What had the Buginese, steering their home-made *prahus* by the stars and their own pre-European books of navigation, in common with natives of their own interior whose "conversion" to Islam had consisted in acquiring the formula "God is Allah: and Mohammed is his wife?" What had little Java, ancient in civilisation and to-day a hive of agriculture and population, in common with its three big neighbours of almost non-existent interior population and culture, among each of whose mountains it could be lost twice over?

A "Touring Company"

What unity the Indies have, indeed, consists in their geographical contiguity and common experience of domination. This first became real to me in a gathering very different from that University one. With some friends from India—British India—I was in a tiny village deep in the Bantam countryside. We were sitting with the villagers under a great banyan in the almost cool dusk watching a "Touring Company" begin the night's entertainment—yes, literally, the whole night's. They consisted of a two-man brass-wood-and-bamboo orchestra with as many weapons as a jazz band, a one-man chorus who was also stage-manager and scene-shifting staff, and about twenty *wayangs*. These, the actors, in gorgeous flowing robes and jewel-studded weapons, stood waiting their cues in a line on either side of the stage, a soft banana log into which they were plugged by the spike with which each was shod. Their fierce aristocratic features under tall complicated head-dresses "registered" various set "stylized" emotions, and their long wire-thin crooked bare arms gesticulated expressively, when, plucked up as their turns came and plonked, quivering, "centre stage" by the "chorus" squatting in "right foreground," they were unobtrusively manipulated by vegetable "wires" attached to their wrists. Apart from these occasional violent exits and entrances no "action" seemed to occur beyond gesticulation, more gesticulation and even more gesticulation to the continuous sing-song declamation of the chorus. Nevertheless my Indian friends were enormously excited. For they recognised the long noses, pale faces, and exotic magnificence of those *wayangs*, all so completely un-Javanese, as direct out

(Continued on next page)



THE BARABOEDOER: "Larger than any pyramid except the Great Pyramid, it is a far greater human feat than any of them"