

CHEERFUL PESSIMIST

THOMAS HARDY: A Critical Biography, by Evelyn Hardy; the Hogarth Press, English price 25/-.

(Reviewed by James Bertram)

HARDY is a Late Victorian novelist and an Edwardian poet; neither period is especially popular today, but Hardy's work in both fields remains a living and growing force in English literature. Why has he worn so much better than most of his contemporaries? He was an indifferent artist, in prose and verse; his explicit philosophy was gloomy enough, and he seldom missed a chance to rub it in. Yet the total effect of his work is positive rather than negative, and he has created a world of the imagination as real if not as wide as Shakespeare's.

Miss Evelyn Hardy's modest and conscientious study gives us for the first time, at reasonable length, a convincing and balanced account of Hardy's development as a writer. The close student will still have to go elsewhere for detailed analysis and appreciation; but this book is a better introduction to Hardy than Edmund Blunden's because it is based upon more thorough and patient research. Some new material is added, notably upon Hardy's

early years and the tragic issue of his first marriage; and Miss Hardy does belated justice to the literary as well as the personal devotion of his second wife. Her last two chapters, on Hardy's poetry, are concise but stimulating; and she throws fresh light on the composition of *The Dynasts*.

The portrait presented in this life is that of a man of deep sensibility whose roots were firmly in the countryside he loved, but whose natural temperament was perhaps predisposed to chills from the 19th Century post-Darwinian draught. Certainly there seems something odd about the boy who stood close to the gallows when a woman was hanged, and later watched an execution through a telescope: it is hard to believe that "a full look at the worst" so early in life cannot have left an indelible impression. But Hardy never lost that capacity for joy which he inherited from music-loving forbears, and the pervading irony of almost everything he wrote is bearable because it is matched by an equally pervading compassion. One of the most revealing glimpses we have of him comes from a late letter of his wife's: "T.H. . . is now, this afternoon writing a poem with great spirit: always a sign of well-being with him. Needless to say, it is an intensely dismal poem."



THOMAS HARDY
His roots were in the countryside

AT SEA AND ON LAND

NOT IN THE LOG, by Main Royal; Penguin Press, Christchurch, 17/6.

THIS is an agreeable collection of experiences at sea and on land by a sailor with a seeing and remembering eye and an unpretentious happy style. In its combination of sail and steam, foc'sle and cabin, boxing matches and

sight-seeing, it is unlike anything I have read. We may take it "Main Royal" is a New Zealander—he tells us he left home to make his first voyage in a barque out of Lyttelton—but he wrote this book in London. The sail chapters are good, but because we get so little about foc'sle life in steam. I found even more interesting the account of a voyage in a tramp round the Horn. The fireman who went mad and had to be shut up may have been a rarity, but prising others out of a bar in Monte Video and going on with bad coal must have been fairly common experiences.

People count for most, and "Main Royal" has a gallery of them, from skippers and mates to national assortments in the foc'sle, third-class passengers via Suez, and exotics in an Italian tub in the Mediterranean. The most violent happenings are one or two "rough-houses" and several boxing matches, but the tale holds the reader, even when the narrator mixes with tourists. Among the boxing matches all described in detail, are the two best he ever saw—a bare-knuckle set-to in an Australian shearing shed, and a bout in the New Zealand University Championships.

One of the best things in the book is the least exciting adventure, that of the author and two shipmates when they go wheat harvesting in Canterbury. Nothing happens but hard work, bountiful meals, good fellowship among all concerned, talk, and picnics at weekends, but the result just shows what can be done with

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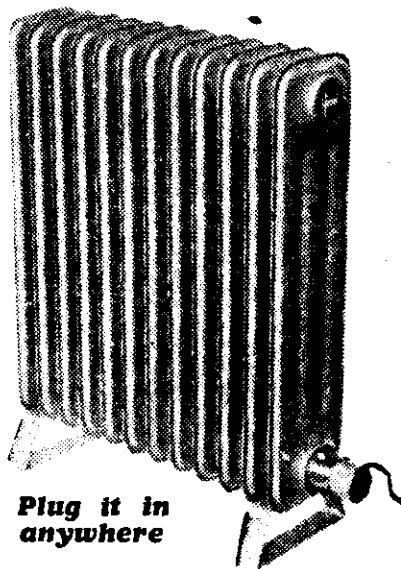
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