

# Compton Mackenzie Remembers

MENTION the name of Ada Reeve and you'll get a nostalgic smile from many New Zealanders. The famous musical comedy star was in this country as far back as the 1890s, in *The French Maid*. Thousands of New Zealand and Australian soldiers remember her in England and France in the First World War. And as recently as the mid-1920s she was here again, as principal boy in *Aladdin*. Although now more than 80, Ada Reeve has recently made a new career for herself as a film actress; but it is about the old days that she talks in *Beaux and Belles*, the first of two BBC programmes in which Sir Compton Mackenzie recalls songs, shows, dances and personalities of Edwardian days. Listeners will discover when this programme is broadcast that Ada Reeve has not forgotten how to sing one of her favourite songs, "Men," from *Three Little Maids*. She will also be heard

talking about her roles in *San Toy* and *Kitty Greve*.

The sound of a hansom cab clip-clopping from Soho to the Strand introduces the first of these programmes, and Sir Compton tells how he drove by hansom to the Savoy Theatre in 1901 for the first performance of *The Emerald Isle*. Sullivan was unable to finish the score before he died, and D'Oyly Carte asked Edward German to complete the opera. *Beaux and Belles* includes one of his contributions, "Song of the Devonshire Men." Other shows represented are *The Toreador*, the last production at London's Old Gaiety Theatre, and Lionel Monckton's *A Country Girl*. *The Washington Post*, a ballroom dance much in vogue at the beginning of the century, the ballad "Chorus, Gentlemen," and the old music-hall favourite "Has Anybody Seen Our Cat?" will also be heard.

In the second part of *Beaux and Belles* Sir Compton's reminiscences are shared by Ellaline Terriss (Lady Hicks). Accompanying herself at the piano, this 83-year-old actress sings what is probably her most famous song, *The Honeysuckle and the Bee*, and she recalls memories of the old Gaiety and some of the stage successes she shared with her late husband, Sir Seymour Hicks.



ADA REEVE, one of the toasts of the gay nineties, as she appeared at the time of her first visit to New Zealand. She contributes to Sir Compton Mackenzie's programme, "Beaux and Belles"



SIR COMPTON MACKENZIE

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final tragi-comedy of the Gurdjieff Institute is fairly and objectively treated by Mr. Alpers; and by the time his story closes, there are few unanswered questions about the major developments and relationships of her life.

Of all those relationships, the most persistent and perhaps the dominant one was that with her father. Here Mr. Alpers has given us another notable portrait of a New Zealander. Resisting the inevitable temptation to caricature, and doing full justice to the energy and ambition which made Sir Harold Beauchamp as successful in his own chosen field of endeavour as his daughter (with her so much rarer gifts) in hers, he yet reveals unsparingly how immense was the barrier between their different points of view. That here, too, a kind of reconciliation was reached at the end does not absolve Sir Harold—and that side of New Zealand life which he represents—from the major charge of indifference and incomprehension that no mere human kindness can bridge.

Until the values that became paramount for Katherine Mansfield are more widely understood and appreciated in this country, the tragedy of her life is likely to be repeated again and again. And that is one reason why we should not (as the editor of *The Times* has recently suggested) "get rid of her" as quickly as possible. Her example is so

significant that we can always learn from it: we have few other examples of the same validity.

If the pattern of Katherine Mansfield's life in relation to her homeland may be seen as first, rejection; then flight to Europe and the painful acquisition of technique; finally, as achievement after a genuine change of heart, it is important that we should recognise the conditions of that reconciliation. The finest passages of insight in Mr. Alpers's book are those, at the beginning of his last chapter, where he considers the themes and the distinctive quality of the last New Zealand stories. He finds in them all a preoccupation with death—hardly surprising in a writer herself under sentence, still struggling with the legacy of a war that had killed her brother and driven her fellow-artists mad. But it is here that Mr. Alpers, following Mr. Holcroft, is able to supply the answer that had eluded English critics—V. S. Pritchett, for example, who complained of the lack of "unseen characters, the anonymous people," in the New Zealand stories. The "silent character," in Mr. Alpers's words, "was not a human society but the lack of one. The silent character was the stillness of the bush, the disdain of the

lofty islands for their huddled little pockets of colonial intruders, the silence of the vast sea-desert that encircled them."

In her art, Katherine Mansfield reached a serenity and a moment of perfection denied her in life. The enduring value of a study such as this is that, with the life at last clearly defined, we can concentrate upon the miracle of the poised, fragile crystal of her art—knowing, at last, all it cost her to attain it.

The English edition of this book follows by some months upon the American edition: it seems to have been re-produced (photographically?) from the American type, designed for a larger page and heavier paper. One regrets here the absence of portraits of Sir Harold and Leslie Heron Beauchamp, and an air of austerity extending to a bleak and unattractive wrapper. The difference between five dollars and a guinea is considerable, yet one hopes that the much handsomer American edition may find its way into some New Zealand libraries.

For the rest, this English edition is quite generously illustrated, and supplied with the same admirable Note on Sources and index. It is a volume which no New Zealander remotely interested in writing can afford to be without, and will remain a rare example of a true artist finding a biographer really worthy of her.

More book reviews will be found on page 26

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