

# Below the Barrier Reef

by "SUNDOWNER"

I HAVE often wondered whether readers make bookshops or bookshops readers. My reason for wondering today is that I have just come away from a small shop in Rockhampton that I am quite unable to fit into the social pattern of Queensland as I have seen it in six weeks and two thousand miles. It is not being un-

**JULY 25** gracious as a visitor to say that I have seen little out of Brisbane to suggest that zeal for culture keeps Queenslanders awake at night. "To hell with culture," though it is not written into their Constitution, will, I feel sure, remain the battle cry of Queensland till someone sees it on the title page of a book; when it will be changed for something less high-falutin. In general, too, I agree with it. Why should a million people rub themselves raw with literary sandpaper when they can so easily catch crabs and fish, shoot buffaloes and crocodiles, keep warm without clothes, grow wheat, sugar, bananas, rice, pineapples, and paw paws; run cattle and sheep without tending or cultivation; and still measure farms in square miles? I am all for liberty and the right

of rejection—whether it is the wisdom of books or the proposals of politicians. They are good rejecters in Queensland—for their age, number and size, the best I have ever seen.

But I walked into this shop in Rockhampton—a long-armed man could have rested his fingertips on the two walls—I walked in expecting what I had seen everywhere else, and found myself reading titles like these: *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, and the *Shorter English Dictionary* (2 Vols.); *Frazer's Golden Bough*; *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*; *Boswell's Grand Tour*; *Toynbee's Study of History*; *Winston Churchill's Speeches: My Country and My People*; *Outline of History* (Library Edition); *Sir Thomas More* (a study by an author whose name I did not note); *James Agate* (one of the *Ego* books); *Private Papers of Haig*; *Life of D. H. Lawrence* (Aldington); *Oscar Wilde* (Hesketh Pearson); *Balzac* (Stefan Zweig). All these were on a single stand, and when I looked at other stands, and explored the walls, I found Science, Travel, Religion, Music, and an excellent collection of books about Australia (birds, trees, fishes, exploration, and poetry).

Did the market for all these things exist before the shop was opened and stocked, has the stock created the market, or was I the witness of a reckless gamble by a book-loving adventurer who has assembled all that stuff in a virgin market as the pioneer merchants assembled shiploads of boots, clothing, tobacco and nails?

A SHEPHERD on the Barrier Reef is about as well placed as an angler on Mount Cook. But when I found myself drifting in a glass-bottomed boat over the coral jungle of Heron Island I realised that the world above sea level is not so far from the world below as we commonly imagine. I saw no Corriedales down there, and no Collies, but I saw mustering going on in broken country and flocks being

**JULY 26** stampeded from open country into scrub. They were jungle musters rather than sweeps over occupied country: the kind of thing travellers see in Africa when a shot or the roar of a lion clears the tall grass, rather than the movement of cattle and sheep into cover when whips crack and dogs bark. We all know that the surface of the earth covered by the sea is as broken and in places as precipitous as the wildest stretches looking straight into the sky, but only divers and undersea explorers realise what that means.

I found the coral forests and jungles both fascinating and horrible. With all

its points of likeness to the world of dry earth and air, the ocean repels and terrifies me when I look below the surface, and I can't think of any of its inhabitants as fellow creatures. If life began down there it was life in such forms that I can make no contact with it. I have seen a woman petting eels, and did once, with so many other New Zealanders, almost develop some affection for a dolphin. But Pelorus Jack is dead, and dolphins after all are mammals. When I saw a whale through my binoculars making a leisurely cruise along the reef I tried to think of it as a link between the creatures of the water and those of the land. But I was not very successful. I am uneasy even on that narrow margin that the late Professor Dakin, of Sydney, found the most fascinating of the whole earth—the strip of shore, sometimes a few yards wide and sometimes a few hundred yards, between high and low tide levels. With everyone else in the Heron Island party I wandered over that stretch when the tide had dropped behind the reef, but I did not enjoy what I saw there or come away eager to return. I have no pleasure in sea-urchins or in sea-hares, in big clams or in Heron Island volutes. There is beauty in sea anemones as there is beauty in the backs of the coloured crabs; but I find it an alien and forbidding beauty, and almost loathsome.

I saw, however, another muster on the island that gave me no shudders—

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