BOOKS

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novel, told in the first person by a conventionally humble servant in the illustrious household. The author calls the hero Tu Ku, in deference to scholarship that might not otherwise approve the liberties he takes with history; but he uses Tu Fu's poems boldly, and to good effect. There emerges a picture of a complex character, an artist by vocation, seduced by political ambition. He weeps, like Ovid, for a Pekin as corrupt as Rome; and is loyal to Min Huang, the Bright Emperor, even in exile. The narrator's Taoist philosophy gives the book a gentle, ironic glow, and the two central love stories are as charmingly told as anything in European Courts of Love.

The Golden Princess is a brasher book, about the brutal rape of Mexico. The author has read Prescott and Bernal Diaz. He is at pains to be accurate, and to give reasons when he isn't. But he can't escape being inartistic. Montezuma would without doubt have thought him as vulgar as Cortes (though less menacing, for the Aztecs had no literature to bitch). If I overstate my case, it is because the Conquest was grand tragedy, and this is melodrama-for-the-movies stuff. I can see the Golden Princess herself, pale enough in the skin to grow a European soul, played by Dorothy Lamour in her sarong days. . . And her lover, the Conquistador, is an ageing Errol Flynn; very high on his horse, the first on the American Continent.

—Anton Vogt

COURT AND THEATRE

BEN JONSON OF WESTMINSTER, by Marchette Chute: Robert Hale Ltd., English price 18/-.

IT is difficult to write a "popular" biography of a poet who lived more than 300 years ago; the times have to be explained as well as the man, and there is a temptation to overload the story with historical detail. Marchette Chute steers her way skilfully; she sketches enough of the background to make it convincing, and allows Ben Jonson to move without constraint among the actors, courtiers and playwrights of the Jacobean scene. His work is examined as he arrives at each new play or masque; but the criticism, although adequate, is not allowed to interfere too much with the story.

For a bricklayer's stepson to escape from his trade into the theatre was in those days a considerable achievement. But Ben was a man hard to stop. His education at Westminster School, under William Camden, turned him into a classical scholar—though how he managed to keep and extend his learning in the years of bricklaying it is hard to imagine. Once in the theatre, he set out to restore to drama its classical outline. He disliked the "formlessness" of Shakespeare's plays, though he acknowledged their power; and he could never understand why his own plays were less successful. Still, he had his triumphs. With *Volpone* "his learning fused with his knowledge of stagecraft and he achieved the classical comedy of which he had dreamed."

His masques, written mainly for the Court of James I, gave him much reputation and an official place as Court poet. He moved among the great with independence, quarrelled with Inigo Jones—who designed the backgrounds and machinery of the masques—engaged steadily in literary warfare, lived robustly on the edge of poverty, and was several times either in prison or in danger of imprisonment through the boldness of his writing. Ben Jonson was small in stature, but in most other ways he was a big man. He dominated the literary scene for many years, and in spite of his quarrels the younger writers respected him and were glad to be of his "tribe." Miss Chute handles her subject with unobtrusive scholarship. This is a good biography.

—H.

Memories of Old Britain

TO many New Zealanders Britain was, not so long ago, home. Even to children of emigrants from the United Kingdom, or their children's children, the sights and sounds, the loveliness and unusual customs of those small islands far across the sea have a significance greatly beyond those of any foreign country. For all these people, the BBC feature programme series called *Postmark U.K.* is intended. Arthur Bush, who wrote the programme, calls his series an essay in "audible nostalgia." Not that it is lachrymose or rose-coloured in its views of the past. All that he sets out to do is rescue for posterity little bits of a Britain which is passing away.

In his first programme, "Some Annual Customs," to be heard from 4ZB on Tuesday, March 1, and later from 1XH and 1ZB in their Women's Sessions, Arthur Bush records the rhythms and chants of the Staffordshire Hobby-horse Dance, which is believed to owe its origin to a Saxon scheme for frightening off the Danes. An old Somerset man tells of the ponies which climbed Helvellyn at the end of last century with their passengers sitting in baskets. There are traditional tunes played from the Isle of Skye, and a very old woman relates what it was like to be a scullery-maid in a stately home at the beginning of the Edwardian era. Arthur Bush also has something to say about John Peel, the famous huntsman of Caldbeck, who, it appears, never rode to hounds at all, but participated in the ancient Lake District custom of hunting on foot.

Wandering about Britain, Arthur Bush visits Canterbury, the Tower of London, the Coastal Watering Places of Western England, Bath, the Clyde and Cornwall. He also has some interesting conversations with men and women of the fair grounds and markets, and goes on a musical tour of the highways and byways of Britain. As 2ZA, 2ZB and 3ZB have already played the first two talks in the series some months ago, they will begin with Arthur Bush's visit to some fairs and markets.