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Books

A MESSAGE FROM HELL

BIRD MAN OF ALCATRAZ, by Thomas E. Gaddis; Victor Gollancz, English price 16 ..

(Reviewed by O.D.)

A NEW YORK reviewer calls this book "most engrossing." I call it as engrossing as watching a man being flayed alive or roasted to death over a slow fire. Those abominations, if they were still committed today, would have their public; but long before the show was over the spectators would have forgotten why the torture was started and have begun shouting for the blood of the torturers. That is one reason why floggings and executions are carried out in camera. However, it is not the floggings and executions in the book—though both happen—that make it such horrible reading; it is the spiritual torture.

The bird man (Robert Stroud) went to prison in the first place for shooting a thug who had raped and robbed the woman with whom Stroud was living. He was then 19, almost illiterate, and living the tough life that was normal in Alaska 50 years ago. His sentence was 12 years in the penitentiary at McNeil Island, of which some idea can be gathered from its 95 rules (handed to every inmate): no talking at meals or at work; no pictures in the cells; no gazing about while eating; no crusts to be left except on the left hand side of the plate; inmates to stand at attention, cap in hand, in the presence of guards and visitors; flogging or "the hole" or both for serious violations. And so on. But the bird man spent only two and a half years in McNeil. During a fight with another prisoner, who had informed on him for a breach of rules, he used a knife and was transferred to Leavenworth, a huge penitentiary close to Kansas City. Here in 1916 he killed a guard who was bullying him, and from that day to this—40 years—he has been in solitary confinement.

But the real horror has not yet been revealed. To confine a man in solitude for 40 years in a cell just big enough for a single bed, a washbasin, and a toilet seat, is shocking enough. But this man, in spite of his bad beginning, a father who did not want him and a mother who worshipped and coddled him, took hold of himself in prison, educated himself, and under handicaps that it is quite horrible to read about, became a world authority on the diseases of cage birds, a good anatomist, an astonishing histologist, as well as a penologist with such a knowledge of criminal law that the authorities found him both a nuisance and a menace, and when he had earned his parole, refused it and sent him to Alcatraz. There he still is, in a steel cage, the Prison Bureau hoping that he will die, the prisoner himself determined to keep alive and somehow and somewhere get his true story to the world.

This book is as true a story as an outsider has been able to piece together from letters, reports, and other material that the authorities have not been able to suppress. It is impossible to be sure that it is accurate in every detail, but more impossible to suppose that it is fiction. It describes at some length Stroud's strange childhood; his two murders; his discovery in the "bull pen" of a clutch of fledgling sparrows blown in during a storm; the incredible things he did to restore and rear them; the steady transformation of his mind and

character from that point on till he was not only breeding birds in his cell, under a humane warden, but writing articles about them, answering questions from and giving advice to bird fanciers all over the continent—till officialdom could endure the thought no longer, took away his birds, his book, his typewriter (presented by a University professor), and moved him to "the rock" in San Francisco Bay. It reads like a fairy tale punctuated by gibberings from hell—a murderer become brilliantly humane, security gone sadistic and mad, and we the spectators powerless to interfere. We are not, however, forbidden to look, and if compulsory reading could ever be justified, this book should be a "must" for every politician, every policeman, and every member of the general public who could be trusted to read it and not run amuck.

THREE BY WOMEN

THE TWELVE PICTURES, by Edith Simon; Cassell, English price 15 ..; *ROYAL ROAD TO FOTHERINGAY*, by Jean Plaidy; Robert Hale, English price 12 6; *THE LILAC CAPRICE*, by Alberta Murphy; Jonathan Cape, English price 13 6.

HISTORICO-MYTHOLOGICAL is a shocking word to describe a book, but it's the only one big enough to fit the gigantic tapestry of fact and fable Edith Simon has woven in *The Twelve Pictures*. She has taken the stock heroes of the Nibelungenlied and turned them magnificently into human beings, and she has also found a plausible explanation of the discrepancies between what the myths say about the Volsungs, the Burgundians and the Huns, and what history teaches about them. A novel for slow and careful reading.

Royal Road to Fotheringay is not quite in the same class, even though it's more history and less myth. Jean Plaidy has made a very competent and informed attempt to white-wash the sensuality, the self-interest and the weakness of Mary Stuart, leading us with considerable skill from the helpless little girl in the French Court to the helpless old woman at the block at Fotheringay. But somehow her attempt to show the Queen of Scots as a woman who was not responsible for her own mistakes doesn't quite come off.

On the other hand, Alberta Murphy's *The Lilac Caprice* is a sardonic and unqualified success. Though what makes it



MARY OF SCOTLAND
The whitewash comes off

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 31, 1956.