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BOOKS

Professor Who Never Grew Up

SCHOLAR ERRANT, by R. M. Burdon;
Pegasus Press, 12/6

(Reviewed by L.G.P.)

IN *Scholar Errant* Mr. Burdon has given us the comedy of an infant society, an infant University and a professor who never grew up. The title suits the man; for Alexander William Bickerton (1842-1929), the first of the professors of Canterbury University College, was at once a Quixote with fine ideas and no commonsense; and a scholar of brilliant ability whose ways were far from scholarly.

A pupil of Frankland, Tyndall and Huxley he had worked with great success in London in the field of adult education, "insisting" (as he himself puts it) "on fundamental principles, basic facts and universal laws"—and not bothering much about the details. In this there are dangers for all concerned. Appointed in 1874 he came to New

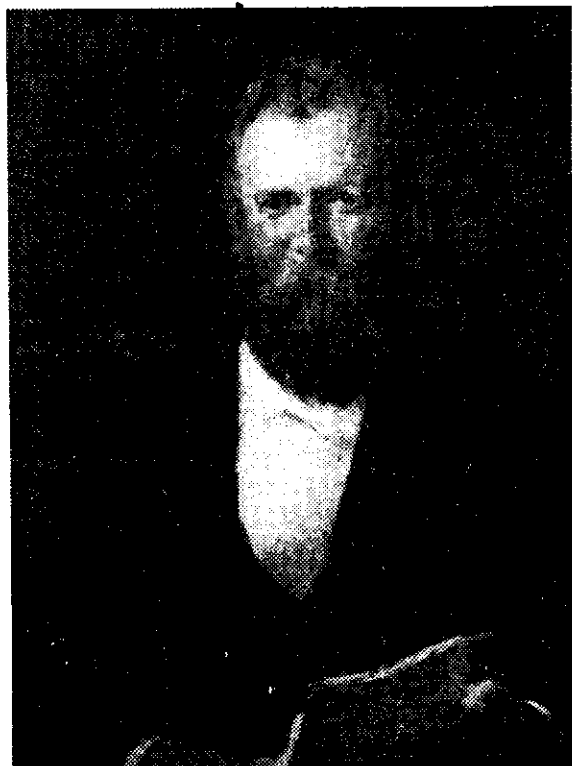
Zealand proposing "to reorganise education on the basis of the laws of nature." He was thus the first of our reforming New Zealand educationists: he had been no good at languages, and had never forgiven them. He was, however, fortunate in having a reputable subject of his own and did no serious harm. On the contrary, he laid the foundations for the study of Chemistry and Physics in this country, and appears to have been a stimulating and successful teacher. Rutherford, his star pupil, was always loyal and grateful to him.

A more important errancy, appearing in the tale of his theory of "Partial Impact," was that he himself preferred to rely on "basic facts" and his own intuition rather than on painstaking proof and the study of the work of others.

It was (and is) a perfectly legitimate guess that the Novae, the new stars that from time to time suddenly blaze up and gradually fade away, might be the result of an explosion caused by a partial collision between two dark stars. Such guesses appear simple once they have been made; but in the field of scholarship not only must detailed argument be offered (and Bickerton was not an astronomer) but the case must be presented in a proper manner. This counts for much. Piltdown Man, for example, was the result of quite a bad guess in someone's brain; but his introduction to the polite society of Anthropology, Geology, Palaeontology, etc., was sufficiently conventional for him to enjoy a great social and scholastic success for more than forty years.

A closer parallel to Partial Impact is the theory (equally plausible and equally difficult to prove or disprove) of Drifting Continents. Almost anybody, observing the remarkable way in which the coasts of South America and Western Africa fit in to one another (not to mention the very neat tally between Italy and New Zealand) might have made that guess. But it takes a geologist of standing and an orthodox presentation to give it the vogue it now enjoys.

A parallel still closer, though in a different field (Mr. Burdon's book starts many hares coursing through the reader's mind) is provided by yet another New Zealand bird of passage. Samuel Butler made the brilliant guess that the author of



PROFESSOR A. W. BICKERTON
A portrait by Petrus Van de Velden

the *Odyssey* was a young woman. On this hypothesis he made discoveries of immense importance, which, though capable in fact of proof, have been treated with contempt ever since. Like Bickerton, blinded by self-confidence and an apparent corroboration of his theory, he not only neglected to do the donkey-work (by which he would have found his argument to be wrong), but, like the young lady of the limerick, sinned against the conventions and came a resounding scholastic cropper.

The similarity between these two bearded and original eccentrics appears in the following quotations: Bickerton—"Following up my researches in heat, electricity, and atomic structure, I began to evolve a new theory of the Universe"; Butler (his title-page)—"The Authoress of the *Odyssey*, where and when she wrote, who she was, the Use

she made of the *Iliad*, and how the Poem grew under her Hands." Both Bickerton and Butler, nevertheless, in one way or another, have left their mark on human thought and knowledge. Their fault was not that they did not prove their guesses, for even Divinity must rely on conjecture and insufficient evidence. It was that they did not try hard enough, made exaggerated claims, and did not remember that it is manner, quite as much as matter, that maketh for success in this world.

At first sight it seems curious that the only New Zealand professor to deserve a full biography should be very largely a figure of fun. Yet Mr. Burdon has found a most stimulating and thought-provoking comedy in the life of this engaging character, who, amongst other things, proposed to nationalise the land, abolish marriage, demythologise religion, and put a final end to war by teaching Esperanto.

The reader of this book will glimpse many a moving picture of a vanished way of life, of the intellectual revolution of the Victorian Age, of old New Zealand and its University that has only grown up since the inflation of World War II, and the inevitable conflict between individual freedom of thought and the social order.

My opinion is that Mr. Burdon deserves our thanks and congratulations.

MILD ADVENTURE

LOVE IN A LIGHTHOUSE, by G. R. Gilbert;
Pegasus Press, 12/6.

ALREADY known to many who have heard it broadcast, *Love in a Lighthouse* is the story of Mr. Gilbert's 18-months' stay as assistant-keeper on a station in the Hauraki Gulf. He went there with his wife and small son; the only other residents were the principal keeper and his wife. I suspect that the author, who is known as a fiction writer, has not hesitated to improve on the facts to make a good story—I find it hard to believe, for instance, that a man who, according to the dust jacket, is "now back in the R.N.Z.A.F. working on his first love—adar," should be as scared as he says he was of a 32-volt battery lighting system; but one should not, I suppose, complain about that.

This is light, pleasant, good-humoured stuff with a strong domestic flavour. It improves, too, as it goes along; and in a narrative which gives a good deal of attention to new skills learned and mild adventures I liked especially Mr. Gilbert's attempts to milk a cow and master the horse Tommy—the chapter about Tommy is very good. I seldom found the book terribly funny, but I suspect the fault there is mine rather than the author's. My wife, whose taste and judgment I generally respect, liked it very much, and was much more amused by it, as I think most women would be.

—F.A.J.

CHRISTIAN LIVING

THE RENEWAL OF MAN, by Alexander Miller; MAN'S KNOWLEDGE OF GOD, by William J. Wolf; DOING THE TRUTH, by James A. Pike; HARDNESS OF HEART, by Edmond Cherbonnier; THE STRANGENESS OF THE CHURCH, by Daniel T. Jenkins. (The Christian Faith Series, Reinhold Niebuhr, consulting editor.) Victor Gollancz, English price 12/6 each.

THE last thirty years have seen a great movement toward non-denominational Church unity. This series of five small books, mainly Protestant in tone and evangelical in appeal, makes a valuable contribution to this trend, by its almost total lack of denominational

N.Z. LISTENER, FEBRUARY 1, 1957.