

# BOOKS

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poem. But a certain propagandist rigidity disfigures the majority of the poems in this book. The curt, exact and pseudo-oracular statement is seen as only a paper lantern when the candle of Marxist enthusiasm is removed. Fortunately Michael Roberts had two very different sides to his nature, as his wife has made clear in a well-controlled introduction—on one side the brilliant Leftist school-master who "expected people to stretch themselves rather more than they had any wish to"; on the other, a passionate mountaineer who dedicated his second book of poems to his wife and to an Alpine guide, who found in climbing a mystical knowledge of the Logos (though he would never have used the term) immanent in created things:

Here, where desire is crucified on splintered fact,

The mind accepts its form and finds its freedom,

The invisible wild tree of knowledge burning

In vivid light . . .

Significantly these lines occur in an elegy for fallen climbers: The ecstasy and release are always very near to the moment of death—"their eyes are ringed with flame, their fingers bleed . . ." It is a perilous defecation, and strange from the pen of the Marxist school-master.

—James K. Baxter

## A LONG TIME AGO

*THREE'S COMPANY*, by Alfred Duggan; Faber & Faber, English price 15/-. *ON A BALCONY*, by David Stacton; Faber & Faber, English price 16/-. *THE RING-GIVERS*, by W. H. Canaway; Michael Joseph, English price 16/-. *THE SIBYL*, by Par Lagerkvist; Chatto & Windus, English price 10/6.

A BIRD'S eye view of world history seems to be the thing, nowadays, for a youngster embarking on social studies. But the bare bones of an ancient civilisation are not enough. They need to be clothed in all but living flesh—cunningly compounded of the facts of history and the imaginative insight of a good writer.

Alfred Duggan, in *Three's Company*, does just this and does it with such caustic humour that a rather dull dog of a Roman magistrate comes unromantically to life. Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, a patrician of Rome, followed Julius Caesar to power in 49 B.C., witnessed his death and eventually became one of the Triumvirate with Mark Anthony and Octavian. Birth, education and honest conservatism took him to the summit of power, but an over-developed talent for appeasement and indecision finally brought him low. A racy account, this, of a period of Roman history full of political plots, when the head of a Cicero was brought down as easily as the level of a draught of wine.

Egypt, circa 1350 B.C., is the setting for *On a Balcony*. This is a fascinating study of the Pharaoh Akhnaton, who banished a hierarchy of gods to make the sun-god supreme. Amongst the brilliant but decadent society surrounding him, his queen and sister catches

the imagination — Nefertiti, whose beauty has become as well known to us as to her contemporaries. Mr Stacton, however, prefers his morbidly introspective characters and thus gives pride of place to the Pharaoh.

Set in the years 500-550 A.D., *The Ring-Givers* tells the stirring tale of Beowulf, leader of the Geats, a tribe who once lived beside the Danes and Swedes. Mr Canaway is by no means the first teller of this tale, as the British Museum houses a precious manuscript, dated 700 A.D., of *The Song of Beowulf*, the only Old English poem of heroic deeds to come down to us complete. The original is incomprehensible to all but students of Anglo-Saxon, who have suffered, no doubt, in its translation; the novel, while drawing heavily on the poem, also develops briefly-mentioned exploits of other 6th century heroes, to make a splendid and terrible story of an age long past.

*The Sibyl* by Par Lagerkvist is a short, spare book, written with the utmost simplicity and feeling. Its purpose is to seek out the nature of God and to that end the Wandering Jew visits a priestess of the Delphic oracle, asking for guidance. The imaginative triumph of the book, however, lies not in her answer but in the compelling re-creation of her life as handmaiden of the oracle, although remote in time from us by nearly two thousand years. —K.C.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*LANDFALL*, edited by Charles Brasch; the Caxton Press, June, 1958. A report on China, Russia and Bulgaria by

Maurice Shadbolt, and a chapter from a novel in progress by Frank Sargeson, are the two most interesting features of the new *Landfall*. There is also a good short story by O. E. Middleton; and a wide range of interest is covered in the commentaries and reviews.

*OUT OF THE CITY OF FEAR*, by Scarlett Panufnik; Hodder and Stoughton, English price 16/-. The wife of Andrzej Panufnik, the composer and conductor, describes her eight years in Warsaw and their eventual escape from Poland.

*THE INTERPLAY OF EAST AND WEST*, by Barbara Ward; Allen and Unwin, English price 10/6. In the second series of Beatty Memorial Lectures, Barbara Ward looks at the contrasts between East and West and at the possibilities of co-operation.

*MOMENTS OF DESTINY*, edited and introduced by Wallace Brockway; Alvin Redman, through Oswald-Sealy, N.Z. price 16/-. Such eminent authors as Bertrand Russell, André Maurois and Will Durant tell stories of supreme crises in the lives of such great men as Socrates, Beethoven, Gandhi and Lenin.

*THE HUMAN VENTURE IN SEX, LOVE AND MARRIAGE*, by Peter A. Bertocci; Longman's, Green, English price 8/6. The Professor of Philosophy at Boston University writes for young people about the meaning of sex and love in human experience and in particular about the morality of pre-marital sexual conduct.



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