

Letter from British Guiana

Politics and Pork-knockers

Georgetown

SOUTH of Trinidad the blue Caribbean ends, the great rivers of the Continent throwing out mud that turns the ocean viscous and pink-brown. This is still the "*Wilde Kust*" or "wild coast" as it was called in Raleigh's day, when the Arawaks and Caribs had left it to nature, moving up the rivers to plant their cassava on the riverbanks. From the air, now, it is endless bush, seen palely through the mist that steams up from the swamps and creeks. The Indians called the whole area from the Orinoco to the Amazon "Guiana," the "land of waters."

We touched down at Atkinson Field, an American airbase twenty miles up the Demerara river from Georgetown, capital of British Guiana. After a mile of smooth American road British Guiana begins with a road of red, burnt earth, pot-holed every ten yards, dry now but in the rains a morass whose surface is washed away into the drains. Shanties line the road all the way to Georgetown, and the visitor by air sees the worst of the colony along this road—battered shanties on stilts decorated with the prayer flags of Indians, the more squalid shacks of the improvident Africans, and now and then a shop or a drinking "parlour" bearing the name of Wung Fu or Chang. Filtered moonlight fell on the Demerara as we came to Plantation Diamond, and molasses scented the air. The slums here were still worse in places, but large areas were devoted to new housing schemes for sugar workers. Rehousing is going on all over Georgetown, a tangible sign to the Guianese that something is being done for them. They are also being encouraged to build their own houses in self-help schemes.

A BEAUTIFUL colonial town of white wooden houses, with broad straight streets laid out by the Dutch and each once divided by a canal. Now most of the canals are built over as grass walks and lined with flamboyant trees. Cool night air, tree-frogs like bird-song. Tremendous rain that night, and the power failed. Insistent song of the kiskadee, originally named by French settlers the "*qu'est que dit*," after its call.

It is the most politically conscious town I ever knew—the politics are local. From the man in the street to the newest expatriate, the conversation is on what is to be done to give the colony a sound economy, raise its standards of living, develop its natural resources. Almost the whole population lives on the flat coastal fringe of the colony and now that malaria has been conquered the population is rising every day. The coast cannot contain them; they must be settled on agricultural lands along the rivers or in the Interior. But in the past, when it was the policy of Sugar to keep labour on the coast, the myth was fostered of an Interior impossible to conquer; and now people will not leave the coast. The problem is to convince them that the Interior is not a place where tigers will jump out on them at every step.

I had a long talk with each of the two leaders of the P.P.P., the Indian, Cheddi Jagan, and the African, L. F. S. Burnham. The Guianese are strongly governed by emotions, and Jagan appeals to them with tears, describing his pregnant mother working on the sugar fields, etc. The party has no

real policy or any economic ideas, only an emotional hatred of what it sees to be wrong. The wrongs are there, but the P.P.P.'s methods of ending them would plunge the colony into a greater misery. A few minutes with Burnham or Jagan reveal their political innocence. Burnham was not treated well when he studied law in England and he now has a neurotic hatred of the English. He still believes that British colonial territories exist to be exploited cynically by vested interests. He said that all colonial freedom had been gained because the point was reached when Great Britain simply couldn't hold the territory any longer and had to give in, and it was his aim to bring British Guiana to that point. He has always been evasive about his feelings towards Communism and when I asked him about this he would only say that it was self-evident that much good had been done in Russia—though, on the other hand, there were many things in Russia that he could not approve of.

Jagan and Burnham have split—Burnham has seized control of the party—and, as I expected, Jagan was bitter about Burnham. But on all political matters he told me precisely what Burnham had told me. Our conversation took place under a portrait of Stalin, and he admitted—with his celebrated smile—that he was a Marxist. He added that when he had power he would not apply Marxism to the country because it was not yet ready for it. He would use the present economy for his own purposes, and await the day of universal Communism in the New World.

Booker Brothers, who form three-quarters of the Sugar Producers' Association, are alive to the absolute necessity of constructive counter-action to the P.P.P.—who would certainly be re-elected if the Constitution were returned and elections allowed. They are aiming to produce cane with a higher sucrose content so that cane land can be released to farmers, thus alleviating the land shortage. They are ploughing part of their profits back into the country, building thousands of new houses for their workers, who pay 8s. a week rent. They want to take part in the "Guianisation" of the colony by training local men for important jobs in the company, but it is difficult to find the right men. When, at a recent competitive examination, nobody was passed, the Guianese decided the whole thing was a ramp. But it is not. King Sugar is

fighting for his throne. He is fast becoming a Sugar Daddy to the colony, but not through any particular philanthropical motive; he knows that the old days are no more.

Along the Coast

THE coast road is as bad as the road from Atkinson Field. It had been raining hard for days and the land on either side was flooded for miles at a time, the stilts of the houses at last showing their necessity. All this land is four feet below sea level. A wall running the length of the coast keeps the sea at bay, but the drained and irrigated land of the sugar estates does not begin for a mile or so inland. The intermediate land, where largely Indian peasants live, grow rice, and keep a cow, is flooded half the year. Even so the thrifty Indians wrest a living here. If you see a really poor area, with really bad shacks, it will turn out to be where Africans are living. Now and then nature has allowed a sand reef to penetrate a few miles inland and here coconut plantations have been planted. The proprietor is always an Indian, and often he has built himself a fine house. One such proprietor employs a man all through the dry season to spray water on the road outside his house so that he won't be bothered by the dust.

All these Indians are descendants of indentured coolies who were brought over to work on the plantations after the abolition of slavery caused a labour shortage. The really rich men of the colony are the sons or grandsons of Indian foremen on the plantations, who got their jobs by force of personality and made enough money to give their sons a first-class education. Cheddi Jagan's father was a foreman on Plantation Port Mourant, and when I was there I met him. He is a tall, fine-looking old man with a drooping moustache, great charm, and, in spite of diabetes, an extreme fondness for rum. "Times is hard, times is hard," he told me. "Twenty years ago rum thirty cents a bottle, now 'e two dollar. Times is very hard." He proved to have a very pretty ironic humour. Knowing that he is a supporter of his son I asked him what he felt of the political situation. "Now this Governor," he began, "him very nice man. Before he no Governor get money, but this Governor very nice man because he get forty-four million dollars. But down here in

Corentyne we no see one cent. And again I say this Governor him very nice man because before him come we no see any soldier in Guiana, and because of he we now see soldier walking round with guns. This Governor, him very nice man."

The plantations have beautiful names, given them by Dutch, French, and British settlers: Lilienda and Sophia, Chateau Margot, Success, Triumph, Harmony Hall, Rebecca's Lust, Golden Grove, Vriheidslust, Mary's Hope, Lovely Lass, Rose Hall, Lusignan, Rosignol. I spent a day at Plantation Enmore. The manager of an estate was a little king in the old days, usually a tough Scotsman who would personally take a trouble-making cane-cutter into the "back-dam" and beat him up. He was equally feared by the English overseers. Much of this remains today; even senior English staff treat the vast old manager's house as if it were some feudal domain and the manager the Lord of the manor.

The overseers patrol the fields on mules, wearing bush hats and carrying long whips, a vestigial sign of slave days. They are there to see that the cane-cutters don't slack; during the cutting season it is imperative that the grinding plant should be kept fed with cane. The cutters load the cane into barges on the canals intersecting the fields, and mules drag the barges back to the factory. Girls walk among the cutters with buckets filled with ice and bottled drinks, which are paid for out of the piece rates the cutters get. One cutter called out to a girl, "Dollar, bring I a Coca-Cola," and I was told the girl is known as Dollar Chance, a local whore who goes round the parlours crying, "Dollar a chance, dollar a chance."

The overseer in this field was a tall man in his early thirties, with a large R.A.F. moustache. He had been an officer in the R.A.F. and came out to British Guiana after the war when there seemed little for him to do at home. Now it is difficult to get overseers from England. Scots farmboys have always proved the best. All over the colony one comes across ex-overseers who came out after the war. Most are marked by an almost pathological hatred of the coolies who were in their charge and a feeling that the colonies are no longer a place where an Englishman with a sense of adventure can come and make good. In this they're right.

All down the coast people had red stains on their shirts, trousers, and hats, which puzzled me for some time. Then I learnt the feast of Pagwar was just passed. It's a Hindu feast; on the first day pure perfumed water should be thrown about the streets to symbolise the purity of the god, the next day red-stained water to symbolise blood sacrifice, and on the third day ashes to symbolise death. In fact the feast has become an excuse for people to squirt red water at each other and to throw girls in ditches, where mud does the duty of ashes. Overseers on the estates are treated to every possible variation during Pagwar and if they complain to the manager they're told that nothing can ever be done about Pagwar and they must lump it.

The Rupununi

THESE savannas lie in the south-west of the colony, ten days river journey from the coast. They are a little British corner of the great Brazilian *pampa*. The grass is poor and it needs twenty-five acres to support one cow. During the long wet season all is swamp and the cows are confined on small islands. During the dry season they roam across the vast open ranges, poor specimens of animals.

By jeep across the savannas. The sandpaper trees, the cashew trees with their pleasantly tart fruit; always on the far edge of us the blue Kanaku Mountains. Creeks of beautiful blue water, but full of pirai with saw-like teeth who have a love for warm blood. Ridges of ité palms. Wind and glare of sun, great dryness—even after many beers the throat feels parched.

We passed the area marked on the old maps as Lake Parima, the land of El Dorado. Now it is dry and parched. Went from Good Hope ranch to Pirara, the next habitation—sixty miles. There are 3,000 Indians on the savannas and a handful of ranchers. All the ranches except two are owned by members of the Melville family. Melville was a Scotsman and by all accounts a man of some education, who came to British Guiana in the nineties to prospect for gold and diamonds. On one trip up the Essequibo river he was attacked by malaria and his men left him for dead on a sandreef. Indians found him and nursed him back to health. Then he wandered with them over the mountains to the

savannas where they went at certain seasons of the year. He fell in love with the savannas and the Indian way of life, took two wives and settled with them, producing ten children. He would trade for them on the coast and come back with bales of cloth with which he'd buy cattle from the Brazilians across the border. The cattle was only for local use—there was no means of transporting meat down to the coast. Then, in 1920, a cattle trail was cut through the bush and the cattle walked some two hundred miles to their slaughter, arriving almost skeletons. Now only the strongest animals are sent down the trail and every day a Dakota flies up to collect meat from the savannas. Meat is expensive in Georgetown.

Pirara is the ranch of Ben Hart, a seventy-seven year old American from South Dakota who came to the savannas from Brazil in 1913 and married one of Melville's daughters. He is a fine old man with the look of a distinguished American senator. When he learnt I was a writer he asked me if I'd ever heard of a fellow who was up in the Rupununi over twenty years ago. "Fellow called Evelyn Waugh. He stayed with us here. A durned fine fellow, a durned fine fellow." He was very pleased when I told him that the durned fine fellow had distinguished himself.

Ben Hart prospected gold on the upper Rupununi river with his partner, a cousin of Jesse James. In those days a section of the northern savanna was being terrorised by a huge Negro bandit called Ocean Shark, and Hart and James let it be known that they intended to get rid of him. One day Melville came to Ben Hart and told him the Shark had heard what he'd been saying and was on his track. Ben said he hoped he'd come and fight it out with him. A little while later, word came that a rancher called Macdonald had died, leaving his small property to his Makushi Indian wife. The Shark had marched in on the wife, taken the property, and forced her to be his concubine. This was enough for Ben—his weathered old face gleamed as he told me the story. He saddled his horse and checked his guns. He camped that night a mile from the Macdonald ranch and next morning went over. Ben found the Shark swinging in his hammock outside the ranch. He drew his gun and said, "Shark, you've taken enough from this place, nothing here's going with you. You've got just two

minutes to get moving north, and never come round here again." The Shark rushed at him and he just had time to give him a blow with all his force on the side of his head, with the butt of his gun. But this only dazed the Shark so he knocked him out with another blow. The Indians looked on at all this quite unmoved. The Shark knew that the incident had lost him his prestige in the area so he agreed to leave. He never came back to that part of the savannas, but some months later he turned up in the south, took over a village, and raped five of the girls. But the Wapishana Indians of the south were different from the Makushis. His body was found in his hut with six arrows in it.

WE SET off across rough, beautiful country, rolling and mountain-edged, to the village of Shea. It is in Wapishana country but has been socially isolated since, a century or more ago, two Negro slaves, Boney and Fredericks, escaped to this part and took Indian wives, raising large families, who interbred. Physically the African element is strong. The people are backward. Children were everywhere. As in the rest of the colony the end of malaria has meant a sudden rise in population. It is one of the Government's headaches to know what to do for the increasing Wapishanas and Makushis, now that their land has been taken by the ranchers and their ancient subsistence economy has been put out of order by the encroachments of civilisation.

On to Awarwaunau, Windcreek Hill, on open land. Children drinking their powdered milk, a gift from America. It is a paradox that in cattle country American powdered milk should be necessary, but the herds are not dairy herds. Mothers suckling babies up to three wherever one went. The tuchau or headman complained that the water was bad and when were the Government going to keep their promise of boring a well? They were ashamed, he said, to offer visitors their water, it was so bad. Fencing has begun so that the Indians' cattle can be kept separate from the ranchers', but the barbed wire has proved a boon to the Indians in another way. Hammered, it can be made into excellent arrow heads for fishing; and fences have been ruined. Fishing with bow and arrow goes on in all the rivers. It is a subtle art; the refraction of light must be judged exactly and

this varies at different times of day and at different points on the river.

Arrived at Karanambo, the ranch of Tiny McTurk and his wife. Tiny has lived here for over thirty years and for twenty of them has had the bricks for a new house to replace his old one, where snakes live harmlessly in the warmth of the thatch roof. When he married, he brought his bride up to Karanambo by river. During the journey, four of their paddle crew died of malaria and they arrived at the ranch after dark to find a ten-foot bushmaster in one room and a large anaconda in the other. But Mrs. McTurk, like her husband, wants to live nowhere else. Tiny fishes all day and I spent much of my time down on the river with him, fishing with bows and arrows for lucunani. One evening we walked through the bush to try and get an aruana, the bait for the huge arapaima that lives in the Rupununi river, the largest freshwater fish in the world. (It weighs up to 500 lbs.) He took his rifle and a cutlass which he calls his "alligator pacifier." It was fascinating to walk in the bush with him, to see him point out a mark on a tree and say, "A tapir passed this way about an hour ago," or to sniff and say, "There's a howler monkey up in that tree, but he won't move." The bush filled with sword-grass between the trees that cuts the flesh like a razor.

At the pond we heard "plonk" on the surface of the water and two three-foot alligators swam out from the bank—they are quite harmless unless you step on them. We got no aruanas but I shot a small pirai, by mistake, with my bow. It bared its vicious teeth in death and I put a piece of thick bush-ropes to its mouth; the teeth parted and the rope was cut in a flash. The pirai, in schools, can reduce a man to a skeleton in a few minutes.

Up the Mazaruni

THE Mazaruni is one of the great rivers of British Guiana, the route to the gold and diamond fields, a majestic river, the bush on either bank filled with giant trees, buttressed like the mora, soaring and straight like the greenheart. For its first 125 miles the Mazaruni is a maze of small islands, rapids, and falls. In the old days, when the mining men, or pork-knockers, went up the river they would paddle against a current which

an inboard engine can only just fight. There would be an average of five deaths a month on this part of the river, mostly when the boats were being hauled over the falls; a man would slip, and would be lost in the rushing water. The Government has built a track which takes lorries from Bartica to Isano, to cut out this stretch of river. No boats now go there, and for 125 miles the country is uninhabited except for a columbite mining camp. The boat of the mining camp was in Bartica the day I arrived. The son of one of the miners had had an accident and he had been brought to hospital the quickest way—down river. The boat was returning the same way and I seized an opportunity to go back with it.

It was thirty-five feet, with a crew of ten Amerindians, a Negro bowman, and an East Indian captain. For each season of the year there is one right way to go up the river out of a hundred possible ones. One passage between the islands will bring you to a falls no boat could get through, another will be a mad swirl of currents. All day the boat was fighting against white water, avoiding submerged rocks. We camped for the night on the river bank, the Indians building me a little open-sided shelter where I slung my hammock. Next morning at dawn we set out again and, as the mist cleared, we reached the really bad spot of the river. We came through a lane between islands where overhanging branches slashed against the boat. Suddenly it opened into a great area of surging white water, the confluence of five falls—Kaburi, Wara-Wara, Pabacash, Piramap, and Annisette—whose waters wrestle with each other and cause a chaos of currents. We fought over to a rock where two lots of water dropped some fifteen feet, and tied up. Everything was taken out of the boat and carried to the comparatively still water at the top of the fall. The boat was to be hauled round over the rocks. Five Indians took the bow-line, or wap, and the rest the stern line, and began hauling to the bowman's orders. The ends of both lines were round a tree, which made me feel a little more secure. The faces of all were magnificent studies of expression, as the men hauled, knowing that if the boat cut loose we would be marooned for days on the rock. "Haul, boys, haul," cried the bowman, "haul the wap, steady, ease the stern line, ease it, hold, haul the wap." All in a cry of furious

excitement and anxiety. At last we got to open water and the most exciting minutes I have ever known were over.

THREE days later I was on the pork-knocker's boat on the Upper Mazaruni. Nobody knows the exact meaning of pork-knocker, but one of them gave me the best explanation I've heard: rations for miners in the old days were rice and pork tails—the miners would say that they were going to “knock the pork” when they went into the fields. The men, and one whore on her way to the fields, sat on piles of cargo, and during a long sunny spell I sat on the roof of the little cabin. One man, a former timber cutter, sang a quiet little song with the refrain,

*Timberman, me weary work,
O-ho, see sun a-go,
Timberman, me wan' go home.
Timberman, me weary work,
O-ho, see punt a-come,
Timberman, me wan' go home.*

A grizzled old man with a straggling moustache sat silent and almost dejected all the way, as if the incurable optimism of the pork-knocker had at last died in him and he knew that he would never find his bonanza. The pork-knocker is “grub-staked” for so many weeks by a shop on the diamond fields and sells the stones to the shop, the trader deducting the cost of the food. Fortunes have been made, but they are always blued in Georgetown. Two young pork-knockers sat on the cargo. They were partners. One of them said something to the other which he didn't like and, probably more as a means of passing the time, he began a piece of abuse which lasted for nearly half an hour. It was a *Virtuosenstück* in Creolese, and I memorised as many phrases as I could to note down later. There was poetry to it—the opening line, “When you me vex so grievously,” might have been an opening line to some sonnet by Wyatt or Surrey.

“When you me vex so grievously,” he began, “I no care wi' yo' foolishness. You musta come from Mars, man, you so low in t'inking and fright me, funny man. Now realise, you vex stupidly. Me carry mood, man, and if d' spirit of God prevent me mak' joke wi' yo' me is reasonable but does vex.

Have me got tek it? Allow me tell yo', man, outside o' business nothin' else I has to do wi' yo'. When me walk wi' a man, I got be happy wid he. You no superior to flesh, man, and when you mak rough jokes wi' I, me has unguarded moments, man, and me vex. And why yo' wan' d' whores so much, man, and you no drink nuff, man. Why yo' value yo' life so immeasurably? When you yo'self, man, me give you a hearing, but me will give yo' no answer.”

WHEN we reached Tumereng the rain had come again. I slushed up the bluff to the large shack at the top. A radio was blaring calypsos and as I neared the sound seemed beyond all measure, drumming in my ears. At two downstairs windows a crowd of laughing women appeared, pointing at me and calling what were presumably obscenities. I found a man and asked him where Mr. Chang was but in the noise he couldn't hear me. The mad sound and the cries of the women had unnerved me and I shouted with all my force, “Where's Mr. Chang and for God's sake turn that noise down.” The man pointed to the windows of the room above the one where the whores were and then pointed to a door opening into their room. I went in and a dozen of them were round me, grabbing at me, pulling down the shoulders of their dresses to reveal pendulous bubs, crying obscenities, and saying, “Yo' frightened me, eh?” I pushed through these harpies to the staircase, at the top of which was a trap-door on which I knocked. It rose and there was the inquiring face of Mr. Chang. “Please tell them to turn the noise down,” I cried, “I can't hear myself speak.” But, talking so that I could just hear him, he said imperturbably, “This is a bad place. They do what they like. They like music like this, all day. It keeps them happy.”

I had intended to spend a few nights in Tumereng, but the shack I was offered was filthy and miserable. I would have preferred a hammock slung under some ité palms to this squalor. So I went down river a mile to the police station, part of which was a rest house. Tumereng was a place to visit but not to stay in. Having been there, I have an excellent idea of what the innermost circle of hell must be like.

Michael Swan

BOOKS

Novels and Highbrows

FROM the publication of *The Pickwick Papers* in 1836, Dickens has probably been the second most widely read writer in the English language. His general popularity has remained constant. His reputation with serious readers and critics, however, underwent a long decline from about 1860 until the 1930's. His novels have now almost regained as much regard among the intelligentsia as they have always enjoyed with the public at large. Even in the period of his greatest decline, he was never without enthusiastic champions among the few—such diverse admirers as Shaw, Gissing, Swinburne, and Chesterton. The repair of his reputation has been made by missionaries as diverse—Edmund Wilson, V. S. Pritchett, George Orwell, Jack Lindsay, Humphry House. I never remember a time when Dickens was not at once the novelist I most admired and most enjoyed; no other writer has been so great a stimulus to my own approach to writing fiction. I do remember, however, in the 1930's when I read Edmund Wilson's brilliant essays, the delighted surprise with which I found my own high view of Dickens's work set out by a "highbrow" critic. I had so long been used to my Dickens worship being received with scorn or silence among my intelligent friends. To analyse the changing reputation of an author who has commanded the respect of such an enormous variety of readers and the high regard of such a miscellaneous collection of serious critics must surely, I have always thought, throw great light not only upon his own work but upon the nature of English literary taste in the last hundred years.

It is this task that Mr. George H. Ford has undertaken.* I do not think that my devotion to Dickens has misled me when I assert that the resulting study, *Dickens and His Readers*, is a work of literary history of the very highest order. Mr. Ford is very widely read in modern literature and literary criticism. He is scholarly, sophisticated, and humane. He knows his subject so well that he asks all the right questions and even where he confesses, as I believe rightly, that criticism cannot answer them, he enlightens by his very negative answer. His study of Dickens's reputation—as I have always believed such a study would do—probes deeply not only into the nature of Dickens's vision of life but also into the aims and scope of serious novelists in the last hundred years. In addition he has the rare gift of being able to deal with complex and sensitive questions of literary taste and atmosphere in a style that retains clarity and humour without vulgarising or oversimplifying.

THERE is not space in a review to mention more than a few of the many vital literary problems which he discusses in the course of this delightful and penetrating book. The central topic raised by the discussion of Dickens's reputation, however, subsumes a variety of underlying questions that agitate literary criticism today. They may be posed proudly by asking: What happened to split up the mid-Victorian novel-reading public into highbrow, middlebrow,

* *Dickens and His Readers*. By GEORGE H. FORD. Princeton University Press. \$5. London: Cumberlege. 48s.