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Books

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Here Be Giants

THE GREAT MEADOW, by Elizabeth Madox Roberts; Viking, \$2.50.
Reviewed by T. S. MATTHEWS.

MOST READERS of Miss Roberts' latest book will come to it prejudiced in its favor. The author has already proved herself one of the half-dozen women writing in America to-day who take their work with that serious painstakingness which a misguided man once defined as genius. And the reader's favorable prejudice will be intensified by the first few words of Miss Roberts' story — in fact, as soon as he discovers that she is writing about our Heroic Age. *The Great Meadow* begins in 1774. That there were giants in those days is one of the pleasant American myths which every schoolboy knows, and the myth is made to seem increasingly authentic as we read Miss Roberts' circumstantial saga.

Diony Hall was the eldest daughter of a pioneer family settled in western Pennsylvania. The Halls' neighbors were few and far, but they no longer considered themselves frontiersmen. To these scattered plantations came now and then a traveler from the West, bringing tales of a wonderful land called Kentuck, flowing with milk and honey; some hardy souls, and notably one Dan'l Boone, had explored the whole of this new land, and had even made a faintly marked trail to it over the mountains, known as Boone's Trace. Young Berk Jarvis took fire from these tales, and went to see the new country for himself: after a long time he came back, more enthusiastic than ever. He wanted Diony to marry him and go to live in Kentuck. On account of the war with England, there was no Church of England parson to be had for the wedding, so they were married by the traveling Methodist preacher, after some misgivings about the legality of such a sanction. The journey to Kentuck, to the outpost called Harrod's Fort, took them nearly two months of slow, struggling travel.

Once settled in the fort, they found Kentuck all that had been claimed for it, but the woods swarmed with hostile

Indians, and it was never safe to venture far from the fort's stockade. Once Diony and her mother-in-law, Elvira Jarvis, wandered to an outlying deserted cabin: they were attacked by Indians, Elvira killed and Diony left for dead. Diony recovered and bore Berk a son, but Berk had vowed vengeance for his mother, and went off with three comrades to raid the Shawnees. Months later, Muir, one of Berk's companions, struggled back to the fort. Three years went by with no word of Berk: finally Diony gave him up for dead and married Muir. One night two years later Berk reappeared. He had been captured by the Shawnees, tortured, and then sold to the English at Detroit. He had escaped, had been adopted by some friendly Indians, and had finally managed to make his way home. And now Diony has to choose between her two legally wedded husbands, both of them fathers of a child by her. Before Berk has finished his story, the reader knows how she will choose.

The Great Meadow is an effective piece of historical writing. It succeeds in conveying to us the sense of those terrific American distances of the 1780's, of the struggle for life, and the isolation of the struggle, which was the daily atmosphere of those western outposts. Even the dialect Miss Roberts' people speak — a compound of Scriptural English, eighteenth-century locutions, and hill-billy talk, all cemented together into a speech as highly literary as the language of Synge's Aran Islanders — even the dialect, which begins by striking us as quaintly plausible and ends by almost wearying us with its choral solemnity, is yet effective.

Miss Roberts has looked back at these pristine days through a telescope whose lens is powerful, whose aim is searching; perhaps the intensity of her gaze blinded her to the fact that she was looking, not at Whitman pioneers three sizes too big for life, but at American men, American women.

Books in Brief

PERHAPS the highest praise that can be given to Henry Handel Richardson's *AUSTRALIA FELIX* (Norton, \$2.50) is to say that, in its way, it is equal to *Ultima Thule*. Its way is, of course, as it has to be, different. Being the opening volume of a trilogy, it naturally has a slower movement: the setting must be fixed, the characters introduced, the mood established, and the seeds which will prove such bitter fruit in *Ultima Thule* must be planted. All this takes time, and some of it may seem boring in comparison with the crises which mark the later lives of Richard and Mary Mahony. However, there is no waste material here; the author has her goal clearly in mind. One begins to realize that the spring pub-

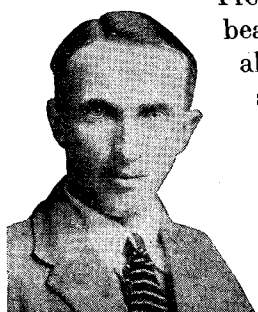
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