

Custom and Belief

ENGLISH FOLKLORE. By Christina Hole. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1940 184 pp., with index. \$3.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD ALDINGTON

THE official definition of folklore is roughly: "The culture of the backward sections of civilized nations." But that fails to suggest the vast extent and complexity of the superstitions, rituals, customs, beliefs, and symbolism; nor does it take into account the fact that "folklore" influences people who would be extremely indignant if called "backward." A case in point is the common belief that it is "unlucky" to start some enterprise on a Friday, particularly if it is the thirteenth of the month. The belief in lucky and unlucky days is of great antiquity, going back to the earliest epochs of Egypt, and very widespread. Before Christianity made sex disreputable, Friday was a lucky day because it belonged to the goddess of Love (Vendredi, Venerdi); thirteen became unlucky because of its association with the Last Supper. This is a good example of the persistence and modification of a very ancient superstition, for which there is no rational ground whatsoever. That it is not confined to "backward sections" was demonstrated recently when the mayor of New York refused to open a new flying field on a Friday. We all know educated people who are superstitious about touching wood, black cats, palmistry, astrology, spilling salt, seeing the new moon through glass, and the like.

In her "English Folklore" Miss Hole has brought together a vast amount of miscellaneous information about beliefs and customs which existed in the past, and in many cases still linger on, in England. It is no more possible to give a summary of this often fascinating material than it would be to summarize "The Golden Bough." But some idea of the scope and nature of the book may be given the reader by the chapter headings: Birth and Childhood, Courtship and Marriage, House and Home, The Day's Work, Death and Burial, Sun, Moon and Stars, Birds and Beasts, Trees and Plants, Water Wells and Stones, Witches and Witchcraft, The Fairy Kingdom, Giants and Heroes, Strange Visitors, Safeguards and Seekings.

In all these varied aspects of life and nature, we find that mingling of the natural and the supernatural which is the essence of folklore. The English are a practical, matter of fact people; and their folklore is far less vivid and extensive than that of the Celtic

peoples in the British Isles; but I think the reader may well be surprised to find how much there was, and how much still exists in remote places. "As recently as 1924 a Devon man was prosecuted for scratching a woman's arm; his defence was that she had bewitched him and he wished to draw blood above the breath and so free himself." I can confirm from personal experience Miss Hole's statement that some country people will not allow white hawthorn blossom to be brought into the house; they don't know the reason, but in the past it was connected with the fairies. And it is a little startling to learn that Herne the Hunter and his spectral oak were "seen" in Windsor Forest as recently as 1931. The May-day celebrations, so bitterly persecuted by the Puritans, (Stubbs called the maypole a "stinking idol") were still spontaneously carried on by children in Warwickshire in my boyhood.

There is a good deal of folklore embedded in English literature. It is found, for instance, in Shakespeare's fairies and Puck, and in Milton's lubber fiend. In the seventeenth century Bishop Corbet in his famous "Farewell, rewards and fairies," says that fairies went out with the monks; whereas Chaucer three centuries earlier says the monks drove them out. Scott was among the first to make conscious use of folklore, of which he had enormous knowledge; but there is a considerable amount in Thomas Hardy. Unfortunately, the more picturesque customs and beliefs are the first to go, and the foolish or ugly ones linger on. The plan of Miss Hole's book does not allow her to touch on folklore in literature, but her book is an able popular presentation of material often known only to experts, and may be warmly recommended as a light introduction to the subject.



(From "English Folklore")

Weakminds, scared by superstitions.

Eliot and Chapman

GEORGE ELIOT AND JOHN CHAPMAN. By Gordon S. Haight. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1940. 261 pp., with index. \$2.75.

Reviewed by R. ELLIS ROBERTS

IN his diary for September 26, 1851, when he was thirty years old, John Chapman wrote "It seems to me that in proximity with women a man cannot command his own peace!" Five months earlier he had penned this grave generalization:

It is in the order of nature that women should lean on men, but men have none to lean upon, and hence the necessity preëminently in them of SELF-culture and by a closer relation to nature to so nourish and strengthen themselves by striking deep and extended roots in the spirit-world that they may stand strong alone.

Unfortunately "nature" for John Chapman always included at least two women, his wife Susanna and some younger favorite to whom he, doubtless, explained woman's dependence on man when he was not lamenting her deplorable capacity to interrupt his peace. He would also, at times, assist the favorite of the moment to find contacts in the "spirit-world" by a little light reading aloud before breakfast, say, from Mackay's "Progress of the Intellect."

John Chapman, bookseller, publisher, editor, physician, quack, philosopher, humbug, and reformer would scarcely be remembered today, except in dusty libraries, were it not that for a few years an awkward, shy, passionate woman, Mary Ann Evans, lived in his strange household at 142 The Strand, next to Somerset House, and for a year or two listened not only to his philosophy but to his philandering. That the man had great talents is indisputable. He was in the forefront of the liberal mid-Victorian movement: he knew Mill, Martineau, Francis Newman, Carlyle, Huxley, Lewes, Frederic Harrison, Browning, Thackeray, and Froude. Distinguished Americans stayed in his house. He was infinitely ingenious in securing credit to run *The Westminster Review*, the leading organ of the rebels; and, if he failed his backers, he paid his authors handsomely. It called for powers of a rare kind that this serious, rather pompous adherent of the advanced liberal party should have been able to retain his position and gain no little respect while he flouted Victorian morality by his flagrant *ménage à trois*: not that he was particular whether the arrangement should be of three or more. Mary Ann Evans,



Photo by Sophus Williams (From the collection of Mrs. R. B. Winser)

George Eliot

who became George Eliot only after her flight with Lewes, to whom Chapman introduced her, was certainly attracted by her plausible patron: but even her libertarian theories were disturbed, I fancy, when she realized that, did she yield to his desires, she would have to share her lover with his wife, Susanna, and with his favorite, Elizabeth Tilley, who united in detesting the threatened intruder. There is no evidence that George Eliot was ever Chapman's mistress; and the legend would probably never have grown had it not been for Mr. Cross's discreet suppression of the whole incident in his official biography.

Dr. Haight has done a splendid piece of work. Here we have not only the text of Chapman's diaries for 1851 and 1860 (the only available years); but an admirable biographical essay in which there is enough material about Chapman and his circle to make this book indispensable for all students of the time, for all biographers of George Eliot. I do not know any book which throws so much light on the muddle, the fineness and the pettiness, the genuine liberalism, and the incredible bigotry of progressive Victorianism as this monograph of Dr. Haight's and Dr. Edward Everett's "The Party of Humanity."

What strikes a modern reader most violently is, I suppose, the occasional superstitious childishness of these advanced thinkers, their portentous solemnity, and their amazing failure to comprehend ordinary human feelings.

It is an entrancing picture—Dr. Chapman seriously enjoying a serious exposition of the serious problem of sanitation, and forgetting the tyranny of the rascally House of Lords.

R. Ellis Roberts was formerly editor of "Life and Letters."

World of Diplomats

RIVAL AMBASSADORS AT THE COURT OF QUEEN MARY. By E. Harris Harbison. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1940. 380 pp., with index. \$4.

Reviewed by CRANE BRINTON

WE are so used to the greatness of the British Empire — a greatness enhanced rather than diminished by the perils it is now facing—that we are likely to forget that only a few centuries ago there was no British Empire, and not even a Great Britain. It would be misleading, and a trifle scandalous to modern notions, to suggest that the weak and divided little England of the 1550's which forms the subject of Professor Harbison's admirable study in diplomatic history occupied a position somewhat analogous to that of contemporary Rumania. Perhaps contemporary Holland would be a less offensive analogy, though like most such historical analogies, by no means a perfect one. At any rate, the England of Mary the Catholic was a small country, known through Europe for the restlessness and political instability of its inhabitants, and at the moment torn by religious strife between Protestant and Catholic. Rivalry for European greatness lay between France and Spain, or better, between the houses of Valois and Hapsburg. In this rivalry England was a stake of some importance.

Professor Harbison has set himself the task of telling how England, technically neutral at the accession of Mary in 1553 was by 1557 drawn into war against France, a brief, unhappy, and unpopular war in which the English lost Calais, their last foothold on French soil. He centers his story about the intrigues of the ambassadors of the rival states to the court of Queen Mary, Antoine de Noailles and his brother François for France, Simon Renard for Spain. It is a story that has been told before, in general histories like those of Froude and Pollard, and in many monographs and articles. But Professor Harbison is no mere epigone. He has uncovered new manuscript materials, particularly on the Noailles, he has mastered the abundant materials in printed sources, digested the work of his predecessors, and produced a clear, intelligent, and most readable account which promises to remain for a long time the best history of the "Spanish marriage" of Mary the Catholic and its immediate consequences. This is a most encouraging book, for it shows that an American scholar, rigorously trained in the

professional discipline of history, and possessing the much-attacked Ph.D., can maintain the standards of his profession, and yet write a monograph which, if not "popular" in the simpler senses of the word, is yet unmistakably a part of history as literature.

It is not a weakness, but a strength, in Professor Harbison's book that he has kept on the whole within the traditions of diplomatic and narrative history. We go too far with such obvious truths as the assertion that each generation rewrites history for itself when we declare that such fashions as "economic" or "social" history have invalidated the kind of history Professor Harbison has written, have made it old-fashioned, incomplete, misleading. There will, one hopes, always be a place for such history, even if sociology one day becomes a respectable science. Certainly Professor Harbison has no reason to weaken momentarily, and make such a concession to the spirit of our age as when he writes: "Sixteenth-century diplomats lived in a world of dispatches and audiences, of paper treaties and hypocritical altercations, of subtle plot and counterplot to vindicate things called personal honor and dynastic prestige—a world which often had only the most tenuous connection with the real world of expanding commerce and industry, of ordinary social relationships, of religious and spiritual aspirations, of scientific and intellectual achievement." On the contrary, the world of the diplomats was—and is—a part of any "real" world, and its history at least as important as the history of prices, or refrigeration, or metaphysics.



Queen Mary