

FOLK-SONG IN ITS CULTURAL SETTING

THE BLUE GROVE : THE POETRY OF THE URAONS, by
W. G. Archer, with a Foreword by Arthur Waley (Allen and
Unwin, 1940, 8/6).

The Blue Grove is one of those books that testify to a genuine advance, in one direction at least, in the standards that govern publishing and reading. Though not offered primarily to scientific anthropologists, it does not hesitate to give its readers the full documentation and the cautiousness of commentary that betoken the scientific attitude. Not many years ago a translator of Mr. Archer's liveness of interest and taste would have introduced the poetry of the Uraons to the English reading public by a slim selection of the most 'effective' poems and a brief sketch of the culture which would have allowed us to idealize it as we liked. Such a book would have been more superficially readable than this and much less worth reading.

The Uraons are one of the simpler peoples of Central India, living by agriculture. One section of *The Blue Grove* consists in the words of the songs sung in the paddy fields while the transplantation of the seedlings goes on. The singing is associated with this process rather than ploughing and reaping because this is the only agricultural operation done by large groups of villagers together, and singing for the Uraons is pre-eminently communal. Their strongly developed sense of community finds another expression in the nightly group dancing, joined in by all the younger people in the village, which is their main recreation and seems to be one of the chief necessities for their psychological well-being. A large section of the book, therefore, gives the words of the songs which are fitted to the drum rhythms of the dances. In line with their strong sense of community, and associated with the low age of marriage (usually between sixteen and twenty), is the Uraons' view of marriage as primarily an undertaking between families and an assimilation of the bride into the bridegroom's family. Our view of marriage as an alliance between two individuals who form a new social unit is not found. Nor are sexual interests at all prominent, in either the dance songs or the marriage songs.

As one might expect from such a public way of life, the poems

that the group produces have no separate existence for the Uraon apart from the occasion with which they are fused: 'a dance poem and a marriage poem are as much the equipment of an Uraon as his axe and his plough. He would as little dream of going to a wedding or a dance and not using them or of using them apart from their contexts as he would of going to plough without his bullocks or of taking his plough with him for fishing.' For this reason Mr. Archer accompanies the poems with sufficient account of Uraon culture and of the social occasion of the poems to give them their setting. Although his interest focuses on the words he never forgets that the words are only one aspect of a wider social activity. Indeed the nature of much of the poetry makes it essential to know the background. The following, for instance, illustrates Mr. Archer's method and the necessity for it:

'Get up, boy, get up
Release the brown cattle
Wait, mother; let the peacocks cry
Let the cock crow
Let the dew fall
And then I will loose the cattle.

In this poem the peacocks, the cock and the dew are symbols of marriage pomp—the decorations in the house prior to the wedding. "Releasing the cattle" means here as in the preceding poem the sending of the girl's party to meet the party of the bridegroom . . .

Here, as in many—perhaps most—of the poems, the similes and metaphors are not completed, the symbolism is left latent. In some, there is a slightly more explicit announcement of the theme:

'Wood, you are cutting wood, mother
But the shoots will not spring again
Will never spring again
My mind is dying in the rocky uplands
Never will the shoots spring again.

Marriage means the cutting of the girl's connection with her parents, a severance of the affections which will not shoot again.'

And in some poems, as Mr. Archer points out, a fully stated simile gives the clue to the method which others follow implicitly :

' The fawns frolic in the ploughed fields
 No. It is not the *sambar*. It is not the barking deer.
 It is the girl selected by the father
 The bride chosen by the mother.'

The simple rhythms and unaffected language of the translations make them pleasant to read ; they are in good English, but English with a slightly unusual tang which suggests close faith to the originals. Although the poetry is Mr. Archer's chief, it is by no means his exclusive, interest, and the general view of Uraon culture which *The Blue Grove* presents is in many ways as interesting as the poems themselves. Perhaps the work can best be regarded as anthropology of a valuable type which is becoming a little less rare than it has been. The professional anthropologist tends to be aloof, valuing almost exclusively the exactness of his picture and taking little account of the intrinsic worth of the cultural products that he describes. At the other extreme there have been more than enough writers and travellers entranced by some aspect of a primitive culture and enthusiastically publicizing an idealized version of it ; the culture is merely the stimulus for their own creative effort. Between these extremes there is a possible line of advance of the greatest importance, which one or two books have followed. In these the observations are scientific in the sense of being full and exact, even at the cost of making the book less obviously palatable. But they differ from most scientific anthropology in giving lavish and sensitive study to aspects of culture which have high intrinsic value for us as well as for the peoples concerned. One of the finest of such books recently published was *Dance and Drama in Bali* by Beryl de Zoete and Walter Spies. And *The Blue Grove*, though a slighter work, is in the same line of advance.

D.W.H.

SCRUTINY is published by the Editors, 6 Chesterton Hall Crescent, Cambridge ; distributed by Deighton, Bell & Co., Ltd., Trinity Street, Cambridge ; and printed by S. G. Marshall & Son, Round Church St., Cambridge, England.