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# OF KENT

Kent. By Richard Church. (Robert Hale: County Books. 15s.)

By H. E. BATES

I BEGAN this book on a cross-Channel steamer, at a moment when the sea was assuming a slightly malignant aspect off the Pas de Calais. Passengers who, only five minutes before, had been happily and sensibly fortifying themselves with sandwiches and nips suddenly began disappearing for air; and in a few moments I was, with them, peering with green eyes into heaving distances for the subject of Mr. Church's book to materialise out of the grey north. For Kent, to me, is not merely the land beyond the seasickness. It is home. And yet, in a way, it is not home and there are despairing moments when I abandon all hope that it ever will be. Like Mr. Church, I shall never entirely rid myself of the feeling that I am a stranger there, a foreigner in a county where all incomers, for centuries,

Mr. Desmond MacCarthy, who is on holiday, will resume his articles next month.

have been treated as invaders. Truer to say, perhaps, that Kent is like a mistress: infinitely lovely and variable, sultry and delicious, warm and treacherous, infuriating and unforgettable: a county that withholds, through its people, the real marrow under-the-bone friendship that you find in the cooler wifely bosom of Midland clay. And having said this let me add at once, after the manner of that poet who could not make up his mind entirely to either dear charmer, that there is no other county where I would rather live, no other county where I think I ever shall live, and that I am prepared to defend its beauties, as Mr. Church explores, assesses and defends them in this book, with my dying breath.

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MR. CHURCH began his book, and wrote most of it, when the county had something of the air of a concentration camp. War restricted his movements into the remoter and lovelier parts and cut him off from the coast, very often, altogether. Kent must have appeared to him, in that tense and ghastly time, rather like a pie of delicious fruitiness placed just outside the bars of a prison, to be seen and smelled but not to be tasted. The result is that he has written a book drenched with an almost aromatic nostalgia, full of love, the work of a poet trying to grasp the beauties of his mistress and knowing that he will never quite succeed: a book of exceedingly personal vision, which is what I believe this series published by Robert Hale is intending and hoping to be, very far removed from the nineteenth century convention of leaving the church-on-our-left and much nearer to the spirit of Young, Cobbett and Byng, with their angry and forthright diversions.

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THIS is not to say that you cannot find your way about the county with Mr. Church's book. You can. It is a guide-book. Moreover, if you have never seen Kent, where the happiest marriage of soil, sea and air has given us the richest agricultural pattern we possess, then the book will surely take you there.

It deals amply with all that is famous: Canterbury, Knole, Tunbridge Wells, the Dickensian associations, the Cinque ports, the North Downs—incomparably finer, in my view, than the South—the Marshes, Dover. It is not possible, in this space, to follow him there; but there is a six-line description of Dover, still sad and ashen below the cliffs that Wilson Steer painted very rightly as translucent cream rather than the white of tradition,

that beautifully gives the spirit and tone of Mr. Church's approach:

Like most garrison towns, it has an atmosphere of grim drabness, of kindly severity and Philistinism; the outlook of the sergeant-major. Rows of working-class dwelling boxes . . . lie about on the hills of the town like red caterpillars.

The pride of Dover will probably find it hard to recover from that bull's-eye, just as the municipality of Maidstone, where the county gaol stands out in ironical magnificence as the architectural gem in a town that is otherwise a mess, will find it hard to take Mr. Church's pitiless and well-deserved drubbing.

But for him, as for Edward Thomas and myself, the true flavour of the county is not in these places. His mistress is on the Downs, the windy flowery acres of chalk, the hop-gardens and cherry orchards of his own special country near Goudhurst, the deep woods of Spanish chestnut and birch, the primroses and the apple orchards of my own, the summer sea-washed light that lies on coast, on barley-fields and marsh, the long rolling wealden hills that wave seaward from Cranbrook into Sussex. The real places of his heart are townships like Tenterden—of its size the most perfect in England—and villages like Goudhurst and Bidenden and Benenden, with their prosperous and amiable Georgian façades, cricket teams on the green, glossy magnolias rich on tile-hung walls of orange-brown, streets of flagged white marble, and over all a tenderness of shape and light that northern counties never know. This is his Kent; and it is also mine.

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LASTLY, the people. He has a shrewd ear and eye for characters, both famous and small, who have wandered in and about the county in all ages. The novelist in him cannot resist the tiny phenomenal accident that lightens the scene. He is rich, rather gossipy, as a countryman always is, in anecdote, and delightful in reminiscence of himself and others who moved in that Kent of far away and long ago, when Penge and Sydenham were hamlets, before what he calls "the tumescence of the Great War" had spoiled the "diminished suburban life" that war finally shattered. The novelist in him keeps the poet in him perfectly balanced, as the poet in him keeps the journalist in check: so that we get here a poet's book that is also a guide and a guide that is also, as it should be, a living adventure.

## Hard Labour

*Water Trio. By Frank Conibear and J. L. Blundell. (Peter Davies. 10s. 6d.)*

WHATEVER its title may suggest, this book is the story of a beaver, and a vivid sketch of life in the Hudson's Bay hinterland. Every incident is vouched for out of Mr. Conibear's thirty-two years' experience as a trapper; his observations have provided the raw material for a skilful piece of reconstruction. We see the beaver leaving home, choosing a mate, building bigger and bigger lodges as his family increases, outwitting or fighting his enemies—otter, wolverine, and, of course, mankind. The beaver's enormous skill, stopping so inexplicably short of sense, may seem strangely human; on the other hand, it is wholly unaggressive—and an embodiment of that most distasteful of all activities, hard work. No wonder that from C. G. D. Roberts to Grey Owl writers on Canadian wild life have found the beaver among their most fascinating subjects. This book is well worthy of its company.