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Arm-Chair Explorers

Travel Books reviewed by

H. E. BATES

LIKE Mr. Stephen Leacock, who contributes a preface to Vilhjalmur Stefansson's *Unsolved Mysteries of the Arctic* (Harrap, 10s. 6d. net), most of us are arm-chair explorers. "With the help perhaps of an odd glass of hot toddy kept warm on the hearth," says Leacock, "I can face any Arctic winter that ever was." Similarly fortified, we smash a way through the Brazilian jungle with Mr. Fleming, cut ice-steps on Everest with Mr. Smythe, slog across the Rubh el Kali with Mr. Thomas. For the price of half a guinea we can get round the world in two evenings. In these times especially, there is no more exciting, useful, and enchanting form of escapism.

For example, you can spend two years among the mountains of Tibet and Ladak, a small kingdom of Tibetan affinities allied to Kashmir, for the price of a bottle and a half of whisky or a stall and a half at a musical comedy. The book is *Peaks and Lamas*, by Marco Pallis (Cassell, 18s. net), which in its extraordinarily catholic sympathy with all aspects of Tibetan life and its nice balance between physical adventure and philosophical reflection, is one of the best books on Tibet that it has been my good fortune to come across. Mr. Pallis is something of an all-rounder: an accomplished mountaineer, a fine linguist, a musician, a very fair botanist, and altogether a very keen explorer. He writes soundly, if a little heavily at times—he should look at the account of the ascent of Central Satopant'h by his colleague C. F. Kirkus in Chapter IV and take a humble lesson from it—and is without any shop-window tricks. His excited interest in Tibetan art, scenery, religion, custom, and the remarkable culture of that country generally is never superficial; it has been deeply absorbed, reverently ruminated upon with that contemplative resignation which is one of the fundamentals of Tibetan Tradition itself, and is offered to the reader with fluent charm and intelligence. You will not find a cheap, ill-digested or, as far as a layman like myself can gather, ill-informed sentence in this book. The accounts of the actual physical adventures of Mr. Pallis's various expeditions, Ganges and Sutlej 1933, Sikkim 1936, Ladak 1936, are very well told, and the pictures he paints of those rich, remote, rhododendron-flowered Himalayan valleys enchant completely. When it comes to an examination of Tibetan Tradition and culture the book goes deep. Mr. Pallis has been more than ephemerally attracted by all that Tibetan Tradition stands for, and he has summed up his feelings about it in his final pages: "At the outset of my story, I tried to climb peaks in a bodily sense; but in the end I discovered the Lama, who led me upwards to the peaks of the spirit." The

book is indeed the most complete form of escape from, and in a sense condemnation of, the present barbaric state of Western civilization, for which we pay so high a price. But it is also an admirable adventure story, illustrated with a hundred first-rate photographs. Its only important omission is a really comprehensive map.

As good as Mr. Pallis's book, but of very different quality, is Mr. Frank Worsley's *Endurance* (Bles, 8s. 6d. net), the story principally of Shackelton's 1914 Expedition to the Antarctic, together with a short description of the 1921 Expedition, cut short at South Georgia by Shackelton's sudden death. Captain Worsley's association with Shackelton was very close, and the story of how he joined the 1915 Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition is astounding. He dreamed one night that Burlington Street was full of ice-blocks and that he was navigating a ship along it. Next morning he hastily dressed, walked along Burlington Street, saw on a sign outside a door the words "Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition," went straight upstairs and was engaged by Shackelton immediately. It was on this expedition that Shackelton hoped to cross the Antarctic continent. The early loss of his ship, *Endurance*, broken up by pack-ice in July 1915, turned the whole affair into a failure which in turn became an epic. After the breaking-up of the ship Shackelton's party set out with dog-sledges, carrying stores and three boats across drifting pack-ice, in an attempt to make Paulet Island. He failed, but finally, after intense suffering and struggle, managed to reach Elephant Island with the three boats. From there, together with Captain Worsley and four others, he set out to make one of the greatest open-boat journeys in the whole history of navigation. In the ship's boat *James Caird* he made a passage of 800 miles, taking sixteen days, back to South Georgia. The suffering of the crew, battered by every sort of fury that the Antarctic could unloose upon them, was terrific. As described by Captain Worsley, to whom most of the credit of that astonishing feat of navigation must go, this journey strikes a deep and awful sense of excited terror into the heart. I know of nothing quite like it in literature. Its calm, unrapturous understatements are classic, and the feeling of cold bitterness on the page is so intense that I believe Mr. Leacock will need many glasses of hot toddy to thaw out of himself the deathly cold of that terrible boat journey. The rest of the book is on a lesser plane naturally, but extremely well written, and is devoted in part to a defence of Shackelton. But no one who reads this admirable, unassuming, epic account of his last voyages will, I think, believe such a defence to be necessary.

Captain Worsley's book gets all its strength from its perfect combination of simplicity, clear observation, and narrative action. The chief fault of Vilhjalmur Stefansson's book, in which he reconstructs five of the greater mysteries of the Arctic, is that it is exceptionally academic. Each story is heavily

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of all this heroism and horror that the Spanish War was simply a curtain-raiser.

For frank entertainments, try *The Happy Harvest*, by Mr. Jeffery Farnol (Sampson Low, 7s. 6d. net), and *Jubal Troop*, by Paul I. Wellman (Cassell, 8s. 6d. net). Mr. Farnol still goes strong. The spirit of *The Broad Highway* and *The Amateur Gentleman* is still alive in his new book, with Sir Oliver and Mistress Clia (together at last on the last page), the Tinker, and Mumping Joe, and the right degree of villainy. It's a fine crimson plum-tart of adventure and love and "period."

Jubal Troop is a bigger dish for larger appetites. It's a whale-steak of a big book, with guns going off, and cow-boys, and the Split-S ranch; and with Jubal Troop as a Western hero, who gets through any number of adventures, and wins his Naoma and all the happiness he has earned. There is a plenty of descriptive writing in this long romantic novel; including a quite terrifying account of the way in which a piece of villainy ends, as it deserves to end, on the electric chair.

Last of all, a chronicle novel, Miss Hilda Reid's *Ashley Hamel* (Constable, 8s. 6d. net). Long and full, it tells how a poverty boy—Mr. Bun, founds a family, which changes into Bohun, and marries into *Debrett*. It is a novel of history rather than character, and Miss Reid is meticulous about her history and about her detail, which always seems right.

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over-documented, and in consequence reads like a thesis. Stefansson, very surprisingly for an explorer, has no narrative sense whatever, and has made great efforts to check and counter-check every statement made. The bones of his Arctic mysteries have been, in consequence, laboriously reconstructed into skeletons from which the red blood of narrative excitement is missing. This is a pity, for no doubt Stefansson has got hold of some first-rate material—the disappearance of the early Christian Settlement in Greenland, the mystery of the Hudson Bay explorer Thomas Simpson, the lost Franklin expedition, Hudson's death, and the missing Soviet Flyers. The chapter on the Greenland settlement—the first European democracy north of the Alps and the first American democracy if, as Stefansson suggests, you consider it geographically part of America—is exceptionally good. All Stefansson's documentation, it should be said, is as conscientious, exhaustive, and authentic as could be. It is a pity his book lacks other qualities. The accompanying maps are excellent.

Wind, Sand and Stars, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (Heinemann, 10s. 6d. net), is much the most "literary" book on the list. The author has been for a good many years a French air-mail pilot, and he gives here his impressions of early flights from France to Africa, and later activities in Spain during the civil war. The book seems a little flowery and excitable, but the account of a forced landing in the desert, called *A Prisoner in the Sand*, is already deservedly famous. The translation is poor.