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WALES BULGARIA NATAL AND THE BURMA ROAD

THIS month there arrives a writer who must at once be put down, side by side with Margaret Leigh, R. M. Lockley, Crichton Porteous and A. G. Street at his best, as an authentic and vigorous interpreter of the countryside. He is Mr. Thomas Firbank; his book *I Bought a Mountain* (Harrap, 8s. 6d. net). Mr. Firbank tells how he bought a vast mountainside sheep farm in North Wales, complete with all that wild grandeur and melancholy solitude, that same gloomy and cavernous kitchen, as you find in Emily Brontë. With his 2,400 acres of mountain and lake and river, reaching at their highest point an altitude of 3,300 feet, he took over 1,300 sheep, supplementing them later with fowls, pigs, heifers, and a wife to whose shrewd and delicate charm the book owes much of its fascination, and began the business of farming almost under the shadow of Snowdon. Authentic experience will write, or give the impression of writing, itself. This is exactly the impression given by Mr. Firbank's account of his sheep-farming on this lovely mountain in Wales. The description of the purchase, the first valuation of sheep, the lambing, the shooting of foxes, the great winter snows, the dipping and shearing and washing, the wool sale, the hay-harvest, and the expansion of the farm by the purchase of another huge slice of mountain—all this is

most memorably and vividly set down in language that takes its accent and colour from the rocks and mountain streams and the primitive solitude. In short, this is real stuff. Behind the description of every experience there is a keen eye for detail, a fine-balanced sense of character, a nice sense of fun. The cold, the wildness, the terror of winter storms are felt in descriptions that whip into the bone; the gallery of Welsh portraits is vigorous, softened by generosity; every page has

REVIEWED BY

I BOUGHT A MOUNTAIN by Thomas Firbank (Harrap, 8s. 6d. net).

DONKEY SERENADE by George Sava (Faber, 12s. 6d. net).

PORTRAIT OF A COLONY by Alan F. Hattersley (Cambridge, 8s. 6d. net).

INTO CHINA by Eileen Bigland (Collins, 18s. net).

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muscle. Mr. Firbank is now, I believe, on military service; but as soon as this war is over his first job must be, I think, to give us another account of life on Dyffryn and Cwmffynnon. Meanwhile he gets a row of medals for *I Bought a Mountain*.

Donkey Serenade (Faber, 12s. 6d. net) and its author, Mr. George Sava, are out of luck by reason of being on the same list as Mr. Firbank. Bulgaria, land of peasant costume, political brigandage, singing gypsies, and valleys of roses, should have been more fascinating than North Wales, but Mr. Sava wastes an excellent opportunity of showing it. Partly Bulgarian by birth, Mr. Sava went to the country to look at a house he had bought in

Sofia, and remained to make a journey into the country with a gypsy guide and a couple of donkeys. Presented with a first-rate chance of showing us Bulgarian life, Mr. Sava dilly-dallies. An occasional description of peasant dancing, a sketch of the mountains, an account of the rose-oil industry in the Valley of Roses at Kazanluk—these are thin fillings for the heavy slices of Bulgarian politics and history between which they are sandwiched. Mr. Sava's style gives a slight impression of manufactured gaiety; it is not improved by a touch of floweriness. Altogether, more in sadness than anything else, I should write off Mr. Sava's book as a partial failure. Mr. Firbank's book aroused in me a keen desire to take the first train to North Wales, Mr. Sava's not even the desire to discover whether the Simplon-Orient is the right train for Sofia or not.

Portrait of a Colony, by Alan F. Hattersley (Cambridge, 8s. 6d. net), is one of those well-documented little histories of colonial expansion which are, if anything, almost too well-documented. Mr. Hattersley's attempt to re-create that vanished society which in Victorian times hoped to build a new Britain on the fertile soil of Natal can in fact be criticized only on that ground. Less documentation, slightly less detail of reference, would have given the book a shade more life. But this is grumbling. Natal, first attracting attention as a potential producer of cotton, became to the Victorians a fashionable colony, with a climate easy on weak chests, virgin soil capable of producing six-foot grass and two crops a year. Later the inevitable pale reproduction of home society sprang up, with at-homes, balls, religious narrow-mindedness, and even fox-hounds. The usual hiatus between colony and White-

hall produced the usual appalling mistakes; the affair of Bishop Colenso was a fire-cracker which leapt hotly between London and Pietermaritzburg. All this and the rest of the colony's history, social, political, religious, and agricultural, Mr. Hattersley describes with intelligence and the neatest command of detail. An admirable little book.

Just as the Burma Road springs into prominence, Miss Eileen Bigland's *Into China* (Collins, 18s. net) falls into the lap of a public which nowadays needs, more than anything perhaps, a quick-change sense of geography. It comes, too, as a shocking and terrible reminder that somewhere to the east of Kipling's romanticized Mandalay there still rages a three-year-old war beside which the affairs of Europe seem little more than a mad tea-party. Against the advice of friends, officials, and everyone else, Miss Bigland determined to enter China by way of Rangoon, Mandalay and the "highway which has materialized from the vision of that grand old man, Sun Yat Sen . . . has become, through Japan's war of aggression, the life-cord linking China with the outer world." Helped by a Chinese-American official of the China Travel Service—unlimited China, unlimited travel, but no service—she did her journey by a lorry which in time became vehicle, eating-place, sleeping-place, and coffin for the passengers who died on the way. Rain, sickness, appalling food, breakdowns, hardship, corruption, stoicism, the alternate grandeur and desolate misery of the Chinese scene, and finally death as exemplified by the disease-hole of Mangshih and later by the air-butchery of Chung King—these are the terrible bones about which Miss Bigland has draped the story of her journey. All I can say of this book is that it is appalling. It is meant to be appalling, and on any mind that still retains a fibre of intelligence or compassion it can have no other than an appalling effect. If you should hear of anyone grumbling about the hardships of war, give him this book. It stinks of death, yet it remains a glorious tribute to "the ageless, unquerable serenity of China."

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