

Reviews.

OLD AND CURIOUS PLAYING CARDS : THEIR HISTORY AND TYPES
FROM MANY COUNTRIES AND PERIODS. By H. T. MORLEY,
F.R.Hist.S. (London, Batsford Ltd. £1 1s. *od. net.*)

It is always a pleasure to greet a book written by a member of the Berkshire Archæological Society and so a volume from the pen of the Society's Hon. Secretary upon a subject which has so far had a paucity of chroniclers comes with a welcome. It is curious that two other books on the same subject, but varying in treatment, should be appearing at the same time—one in England and, the writer believes, one in America—and yet for half a century or more the subject has been neglected and has not received that attention from writers which its importance obviously warrants.

Mr. Morley has been explicit in his Introduction. He explains that he has not attempted a "history" of playing cards and he has kept scrupulously to his title apart from the ten pages of historical preface necessary to the subject. In this brief resumé he has given his readers the consensus of opinion regarding the origin, purpose and meaning of playing cards which, like many other things of utility and pleasure, came from the East. As early as the 14th century they were in use in Europe for games and fortune-telling coupled with all the mysticism and trickery of the professional charlatan. An American writer would take us back to the days of the Pharaohs for the origin of playing cards; but the evidence is not completely satisfying and the suggestion from another quarter that their origin is associated with the game of Chess is also advanced with caution.

Mr. Morley has been a keen collector of these relics of fun and necromancy for many years and apart from his own extensive collection he has had access to other important collections in compiling his book; notably those at the British Museum, the Bodleian Library and that at the Guildhall, London, belonging to the Worshipful Company of Makers of Playing Cards. The range of the use of playing cards is a wide one and the author illustrates

and explains the intricate variations of packs from India, China, Japan, Burmah and Tibet ; from Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Holland and Belgium and North America (Indian). His work is brought up-to-date by an illustration and a note upon a number of bone cards used by prisoners during the great war 1914-18, recalling the artefacts made by prisoners during the Napoleonic aggression of over a century ago

But what is perhaps the most interesting section of the book is that dealing with English cards and, as the author says, pictorial packs have been frequently seized upon to depict significant political and social events, the scenes displayed being not always free from license and scurrility. The Spanish Armada, the rebellion of the Duke of Monmouth, the Titus Oates plot, the Rump Parliament and the landing of William of Orange have been signalled out for packs by would-be chroniclers of events of dynastic importance. In the pack dealing with the events consequent upon the landing of William of Orange the Seven of Diamonds depicts the " Fight at Redding " ; and upon that of the Queen of Hearts in the same pack appears the legend " A fight at Reding wherein the Irish Souldiers suffred most the people firing out at windows on them." The South Sea Bubble and the Duke of Marlborough's Victories have also been pictorially portrayed, and satire and lampoon, vulgar and venomous, have not been neglected.

While some of the cards are coarse and rough, many of the foremost engravers have contributed to the artistic merit of some of the packs, notably Cranach, Jost Ammon, Van Mecken, Hans Sebald Beham and Schongauer. Heraldry, astronomy, geography, proverbs, fables, all have had their packs to inculcate learning, art and morality in addition to affording a means to exercise the gambling spirit which is and always has been latent in so large a part of the world's inhabitants.

To enumerate the many phases of social and political life, and the multitudinous byways into which they lead, which have been depicted on these pieces of pasteboard would be a lengthy task, and even a cursory acquaintance with the author's book

will bring surprise to many folk to learn how wide a field has had to be surveyed in its compilation. The humble devotee of a rubber of whist or bridge knows little of the realm of romance and fact which in the past centuries has combined to produce the "pack" that affords him such pleasant recreation.

We heartily congratulate our Hon. Secretary upon the completion of what must have been a long and tedious task, calling for wide knowledge and deep research. But the task has been decidedly worth the doing and we can with every confidence recommend his book, not only to those historically interested in the subject, but to the many others who find pleasure in a "game of cards." The book contains over three hundred illustrations, many in colour. Copies may be ordered through any bookseller or may be obtained from the author himself at Leicester House, King's Road, Reading.

E.W.D.



The Fight at Redding, from pack illustrating the Revolution of 1688.