

## Reviews.

THE BERKSHIRE BOOK OF SONG, RHYME AND STEEPLE-CHIME.

By A. L. HUMPHREYS, F.S.A. (London: Methuen, 12/6 net).

A very wide public has given evidence of its interest in Mr. A. L. Humphreys' new book. Although it deals almost exclusively with the royal county there is no territorial limit to the wit and wisdom it contains. But Berkshire will be doubly impressed by this assemblage of the lore of its own towns and villages and rural areas, quite apart from its pleasant readableness and able editing.

The author has divided his garner into three sections. The first deals with folk-lore, proverbial sayings and rural saws; the second with songs sung at children's village games; and the third with rhymes, bell mottoes, epitaphs, and snatches of song about many of the towns and villages in the county. The last section occupies about five-sixths of the book and is ably annotated by the author. Let us take the sections in their order. It is sometimes not realised how remotely incommunicable were many of the villages and hamlets of western Berkshire before the accession of Queen Victoria. Far removed from the greater roads by miry trackway, these settlements were fecund soil in which folk-lore and legend flourished. There grew up a medley of invocatory rhymes and appeals in which the bucolic mind found not a little comfort and security. Scores of such saws and precepts must be lost; but many survive. Here is one:—

“ They did pray to God and St. Oswald,  
To bring the sheep safe to the fold.”

Down to the seventeenth century the shepherds of the Wiltshire and Berkshire uplands used to invoke, in the above lines, the aid of St. Oswald in the care of their flocks. It is not stated why this was done; but I recall that in 1436 a royal mandate required that the shrine of this saint should be carried in monastic processions, “ that the rains may cease, which are causing a piteous destruction of corne upon the earth.” It is not surprising that there are many

items in the Berkshire book that can be paralleled in other counties. A notable example centres about the magpie, bird of omen :—

“ One for sorrow, two joy,  
Three a wedding, four a boy ;  
One sorrow, two mirth,  
Three wedding, four a birth.”

It is rarely now that one hears before the low thatched cottages on the margin of Berkshire village greens maidens chanting

“ Wall-flower, wall-flower, growing up so high ;

We are all young ladies, but we shall all die,”

or the less woeful summons to pass “ In and out the window,” which said window is a ring formed by happy children’s hands. As to the young lads of the village, “ Billy, billy bust ; Who speaks fust” was always a favourite game, and perhaps second in popularity only to one Mr. Humphreys does not mention ; but which was played in Reading on fine dark winter nights a half-century ago—“ Dicky dyke, show your light ; or else the dogs won’t follow.” It was a form of nocturnal paperchase and a small lantern was used by the quarry to indicate, on turning corners, his whereabouts to the distant pursuers.

The third section of the book is richer in detail than the others, and the author’s notes show a wide range of reading. It includes, as has already been noted, bell mottoes, epitaphs, toasts, sport and the flowing bowl, and each place in the county is dealt with in alphabetical order. I suspect the reader will turn to the spot which has for him or her the homeliest and most interesting associations, and even a reviewer is not, I fear, proof against this mild parochialism. I could not fail to be moved by the exquisite epitaph on little Margaret Chute, who died, aged  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years, and was buried in Sonning Church three hundred and eight years ago :—

“ What beauty would have lovely stiled,  
What manners sweete, what nature mild,  
What wonder perfect, all were fil’d  
Upon record in this one child.”

And equally appealing is the verse on the Rich children which is in the same church and is given in "The Berkshire Book."

At the other end of the county I was impressed with the fine lines of Joshua Sylvester's "ideal life" as it appears in "Du Bartas":—

LAMBOURN.

"Let me, good Lord, among the great unken'd  
My rest of days in the calm countrey end,  
Let me deserve of my deer Eagle-Brood,  
For Windsor-forest walkes in Almes-wood:  
Be Hadley pond my sea; Lambs-bourn my Thames;  
Lambourn my London; Kennet's silver streams  
My fruitful Nile; my songsters and musicians.  
The pleasant birds with warbling repetitions;  
My company, pure thoughts, to work Thy will;  
My court a cottage on a lowly hill;  
Where without let I may so sing Thy name,  
That times to come may wonder at the same."

But I must cease to quote. Berkshire folk cannot be too grateful to Mr. Humphreys for assembling under one literary roof, as it were, so generous a medley of Berkshire wit and wisdom and memorabilia. He has been a zealous accumulator of local literary lore for many years, and into his wallet has been poked drollery, proverb and saw as they caught his eye. He would probably be the first to admit that some of the more remote axiomatic utterances of the hoary past may have eluded him; but in selection, quality and quantity he has given us a delightful hoard. As is usual with his books, it is not only their contents that receive his careful oversight. The format and production generally are in the best possible taste, and the colourful covers strike a cheerful note.

The book should be in the hands of everyone to whom the County of Berkshire and its past are real and vivid. And, indeed, it will make its way much further afield. E.W.D.

COMPANION INTO OXFORDSHIRE. By ETHEL CARLETON WILLIAMS.  
(London : Methuen, 7/6 net).

We have to welcome another book from one of our members—Miss Ethel Carleton Williams, M.A. This time Miss Williams has gone into the neighbouring county of Oxfordshire with very pleasant results.

Recent years have seen a plethora of books upon the Shires of England intended to interest a growing public in their charm and history. Some of these books have been good ; others not so good. Some have perpetuated the mistakes of earlier writers in the same field, and have been an obvious *réchauffé*, stale and unprofitable. The alliance of modern research with the ability to tell a story is not an easy task, but when it is satisfactorily accomplished the result is always worth the labour. Upon my shelves are many books devoted to Oxfordshire, but I am happy to be able to add to them this latest production from the pen of a lady who has made the county her home for some years and found her way into its " sweet corners " with a very definite purpose. Many of the old stories must perforce be told again—Minster Lovel, Chalgrove Field, Pope and Mapledurham, Ewelme and the Rollright Stones among them—but it is still possible to invest these high lights of the Shire with an added interest. In any event, no reader would expect them to be omitted. Oxford City, with its measureless story, has been wisely excluded, for condensation is an art in itself, and Miss Carleton Williams could not hope to do justice to the citadel of culture in a volume of the scope and size she has essayed.

The author has divided her itinerary into four parts, coming into the county on the four cardinal points. She begins at Cropredy, on the borders of Warwickshire and Northants, and straightway we are in the midst of beauty that gathers itself gracefully and naturally about Cropredy Bridge. " Time passes slowly at Cropredy ; there is a village green ; the church is lit by candles ; every morning at six the Aves bell is sounded, and every evening at eight the curfew rings. The old man who rings it has done so for forty years, and his father and grandfather did so before him. Now he is wondering whether the curfew

will sound no more, when his hand is not there to pull the rope. Yet he, too, is not untouched by the spirit of the age, for he has calculated that every stroke he sounds, year in, year out, is remunerated at the rate of one half-penny a time." Readers will have their personal choice, but to the majority I fancy the northern portion of the Shire will take the honours, for it includes Fritwell, Godstow and Binsey and the sheer delight of Great Tew ; while in the same historic section are Broughton Castle and Blenheim Palace, and that gem in old stone, New Bridge, with " The Rose Revived," an inn sacred to undergraduates.

Miss Carleton Williams has excavated some material that will probably be new to her readers. How many for instance, are aware that four miles west of Banbury, in Stutford, a remote village in the heart of the Oxfordshire Hills, the manufactory of livery plush has been carried on for centuries ? " Here are made great rolls of green cloth for the livery of the Royal Foresters at Windsor, bales of embossed crimson for upholstering seats in the House of Commons, and gorgeous scarlet uniforms for foreign courts. But times are bad, as the owner of the works admits sadly. Revolutions have played havoc with Stutford's markets. Spain, one of their best customers, no longer orders the brilliant scarlet and gold liveries of monarchical days, and bale upon bale of purple cloth, which was made for the Persian Court and no longer needed by the present Shah, lies idle on the shelf. In time, perhaps, things may improve ; by a turn of fortune's wheel Spain may become a customer again, or Germany send orders for golden plush, as she did before the Great War." There was a day, not long ago, when a loom was to be found in every cottage in the village, but only an optimist of the first water could hope to see a revival of such rural activity in fine craftsmanship.

Another minor Oxfordshire industry may be unfamiliar to many. I know Wheatley, a large village just off the main Oxford-Aylesbury road, very well, but it was news to me that it has an industry which links it with the herring fishers of the North Sea. " Few Grimsby fishermen have ever heard of this Oxfordshire village, yet it is here that the trawl bobbins on their nets are made. It you stroll through Wheatley, you can see the bobbins

being turned out by the hundred, rounded sections of elm varying in diameter from 9 to 26 inches, and in depth from 8 to 10 inches."

In every Shire there are some features of its history and beauty which will for ever stand out with a conspicuous claim to permanent notice. Oxfordshire has not been denied its share, and Miss Carleton Williams has given them their due. But much of the charm of her book lies in the discoveries she has made in the course of a pleasant inquisitiveness. She learned, among other things, that the twittering of the swallows outside old Waterperry Church almost drowns the voice of the preacher, and that the vicar, who loves birds, has placed a notice over the church door: "Of your charity latch this door lest a bird enter and die of thirst." That is a very beautiful thought, and to many more appealing than the jewelled radiance of the old glass that throws its refulgent hues on the slabbed floor, beneath which lies all that is mortal of many of Waterperry's past inhabitants.

The manifold delights of hill and dale and wood can only be fully appreciated by those who, with leisure and a love for the past and all it enshrines, are content to track them down without the modern aids of locomotion. You must come upon these haunts of ancient peace on foot and unencumbered, and then, without fume and bustle, you may sup to the full of the fare that the centuries have laid up. And if you take in your knapsack the "Companion into Oxfordshire," there will be little you will miss and very much you will gain; for Miss Carleton Williams is an entertaining guide, and her enthusiasm for her subject is only equalled by her ability to impart the story of the wonderful Shire through which she so diligently carries her readers. The book has sixteen full-page illustrations of some of the most charming spots in the county, and these add considerably to its interest.

E.W.D.