

GUAVAS THE TINNER

Appropriately dedicated to his archaeological friend Robert Burnard, SBG's novel of the Dartmoor tin industry in the times of Queen Elizabeth I was published by Methuen with the title page date of 1897. However it was evidently issued in time for the Christmas season of 1896 (the catalogue in my copy is dated Nov.1896).

The author introduces the historical background to the plot -namely the stannary laws of 1288 under King Edward 1, whereby the 13th portion of ore retrieved was due to the Crown. The third offence of theft under this law led to 'crucifixion' by the hand. Rough justice was the order of the day, and Guavas, a Cornishman, found himself the victim of his own success and local prejudice. His faithful wolf friend, and third party claims for his affections, provide the romantic interest.

Typical SBG observations on the social and topographical environment keep the reader enjoyably informed. 'Stream' tin and gold was collected until the supply ran out, and then mining started – but gold belonged to the Crown entirely. During the 13th century Dartmoor production dwindled from two thirds of the total, and by 1600 it was only 5% of the Cornish. However it was not until 1749 that the Annual Tinner's Parliament moved from Crocken Tor to Truro. We learn that the whole of Dartmoor was in Lydford parish under the Tudors; and at the end of chapter VI there is an interesting note on 'soul-cakes' and 'sin-eating' (compare the Levitical scapegoat, and see the following chapter, p.64). Gems of incidental philosophy/theology is found: for instance, in the tinner's comment on his tame wolf: "I cannot break him of what was placed in his nature. Therefore, I am obliged to keep him under restraint".

Altogether a gutsy tale of heart, mind and body. ■

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