

JOHN HERRING - WHAT THE REVIEWERS THOUGHT

I recently acquired Vol. 3 only of the first edition of John Herring. Partial compensation for the lack of volumes 1 & 2 was the number of press reviews pasted inside the cover. They provide an interesting and varied insight into how this book was received.

John Herring was published anonymously (by the author of 'Mehalah') late in 1883. The following are extracts from the full reviews.

The first review that I have is by E. Purcell in the Academy of November 17th 1883. Clearly, Purcell was not impressed:

'The opening of John Herring is wonderful, most picturesque, dramatic and mysterious. It is easy to see at a glance that this West-country story is inspired by Mr Blackmore's Maid of Sker, but the first few chapters gave promise of something even better than the model. The interest so thoroughly aroused, is fairly sustained though the first volume, after which it falls off, the workmanship deteriorates and the whole thing remains an ambitious but unmistakable failure. Why, we cannot guess; for the author never regains, even at intervals, the high ground he has once lost. Probably he is somewhat young, at least in writing, muddled by too much recent reading of the Science of Savagery ... Yet he shows much ability, the "all round" culture of the scholar and gentleman, singular power and freshness of dramatic presentation, and above all a thorough command of the pen. His characters - at least, the leading ones - are well defined and sympathetically drawn ...

Well as he begins, he has hardly succeeded in his Dartmoor savage and his daughter, this sketch degenerates into an academic illustration of the popular theories of barbarism. The plot dwindles down into sordid intrigues and villainies ... We will not divulge the story; for disappointing failure as it is, and, to speak plainly, an anachronism in three volumes ... still it is far, very far, above the level of ordinary novels.'

The second, much more favourable review appeared in the Scotsman on November 30th 1883:

'When the novel "Mehalah" was published, it was seen at once that a writer of fiction had come before the public of far more than ordinary power. Therefore, when it was seen that a new story by the same author was about to be published, there was rejoicing among all who wish that the fiction of the period should be good. ... the reader will not fail to notice how fine as a work of art is the road by which the conclusion is reached. ... We are not inclined to quarrel with any single feature of the story. It seems to us that the author has carefully studied every incident and every person he describes, and that there is nothing but what is in strict keeping with human nature in all that is done. It is true, some call is made upon our imagination. For our part, we would have wished that the story had ended differently; yet it must be admitted that in its conclusion there is, perhaps as much as in any part of it, shown the hand of the true artist. It is a deeply interesting novel, which rightly read, will not merely amuse and interest for the time, but which will be found to have the material for a great deal of useful thought.'

The third review, in the Court Journal of December 8th, occupies well over a page. The

reviewer starts with a glowing account of Mehalah and then says that:

“The most trying situation in literature is that of a writer whose first work has been received with striking favour by the public. So much is expected of him in his second venture ... The rich and powerful imagination displayed in Mehalah made us welcome with avidity the present novel by the same author. But, alas! The writer of John Herring has been evidently compelled to abandon the route traced out by his own particular talent and follow that suggested by the public. He is concerned no longer to please himself and do honour to the glorious gift bestowed on him by nature, but to please the caterers for the amusement most in request by the town. The consequence is mournfully apparent in this new work. ... To give a fair review of a work which combine so many contrasting qualities is a difficult task. It would by many critics be pronounced excellent were not Mehalah so much better. The charm of the writer lies in the depth of feeling expressed by his characters ... but as they disappear to give place to others we are struck with a want of reality which pervades them all. Not one of the personages is true to nature, not one is consistently drawn or made to act in a natural manner. We hope to meet the author of John Herring again ere long, prepared to give us his two volumes without the padding needed for fulfilment of the inexorable sentence of a middle volume pronounced by the circulating libraries and adhered to under compulsion by the publishers. So shall we be enabled to congratulate ourselves upon having at last amongst us a writer of genuine romance, who avoids the tea-drinking and the small talk of the modern novel, but awakes the imagination of the reader to curiosity and interest.”

The fourth review appeared in the Manchester Guardian on December 14th 1883 (wrongly quoting the novel as published in two volumes).

“All who have read 'Mehalah' will open this book with feelings of curiosity and interest. That strange and powerful story was recognised as the work of no literary novice, though possibly of one new to fiction, and its high promise encouraged the hope that a second essay on the same lines might give us something of quite the first class. The essay has been made, and the results impresses us, we must confess, with a feeling of some disappointment. John Herring is a remarkable story, a novel of high order, but not the highest. There is no advance on Mehalah ... and although the work is more compact and the interest more evenly maintained, no such heights of passion and intensity are attained or attempted ... the book is not saturated with the local colour, as was Mehalah. ... The plot is ingenious and elaborate, working up to a tragic ending through a long series of unusual incidents. Unfortunately, the author seems compelled to make continual demands on the reader's faith. Not once or twice the progress of the story depends on a succession of improbable coincidences; and at two points, at least, the entire plot turns on the maintenance of a state of things so contrary to reason the common sense as seriously to impair the artistic value of the whole work.”

The second half of the review is so different that you wonder if it was written by the same reviewer!

“We have already indicated implicitly the good points of John Herring. They are neither few nor unimportant. The book is no tale of tea parties, no "society" chronicle of small talk; but is full of vigour and originality. The author does not fear to portray strong emotion, to depict unusual incident and unconventional character. The dramatic instinct is strong in him, and the book abounds in striking scenes and situations. The characters are well and boldly drawn,

their individuality strongly marked and well maintained. The dialogue is concise and pointed. There is absolutely no padding, and not a dull page. The story is worked out with elaborate ingenuity and unflinching effect; it is difficult to recall a single incident that is not necessary to the due evolution of the plot. John Herring is a remarkable novel and far indeed above the level of contemporary fiction."

The sixth review, a favourable one, was in the Graphic on December 15th 1883:

"None who read "Mehalah" are likely to forget that strangely powerful tragedy, resembling a transfer of the scene of "Wuthering Heights" from the Yorkshire Moors to the Essex Salt Marshes. "John Herring" ... is at least equally fascinating, equally powerful, and far more agreeable to read. Since the author chooses to conceal his name, it is not for us to attempt openly to speculate upon the identity of one who, by these two singular works, has established a claim to be regarded as amongst the strongest and most original of living writers of fiction. At the same time, it is not particularly difficult, even from internal evidence, to form an opinion. The story itself is romantic and interesting to the highest degree, apart from its purpose and its extraordinary wealth in novel and original portraiture. From all the ordinary fiction of the day it stands out with absolute grandeur; and no sort of justice can be done to it in a short review."

A seventh review occupied one page in the January 5th issue of the Saturday Review. It starts

"It is not enough that a novelist should conceive a powerful situation. Whether he succeeds or not in approaching the perfect type must, in a great measure, depend on the means by which his characters are developed and the chain of events that lead up to the situation put together. If the means he uses are such as to violate probability, or to make us feel out of sympathy with those of his creation ... then the story, however good the situation, fails as a whole. ... This seems the fault of John Herring, otherwise a very well told story.

The main situation is excellent, the style is rapid and vigorous throughout, while the reflections and comments are full of shrewdness and humour; but the failure in the development of the story is pronounced and cannot be completely condoned by any of the other virtues which the book possess in so high a degree. Our sympathy of comprehension is forfeited in both hero and heroine. ... But before we attempt to justify such a view, let us express our thanks to the author of John Herring for so pleasant a book. Those who agree with the view stated above, and wish the book better, cannot but at the same time be delighted with the wit of the comments, the reality and charm of the dialogue, and the correctness of the descriptions. No one who takes up John Herring will be likely to lay it aside unread, and even the most inveterate skipper will find in it a spell to chain his wandering eyes.

... It is needless to wish John Herring success, for that is secured to any work by the author of Mehalah. Still we do so, and wish further that it may not be long before he gives to the world another West of England Romance."

Roger Bristow