

Literary Matters

Harold Kirk-Smith's book "**Now The Day is Over**" The life and Times of Sabine Baring-Gould 1834-1924 is now available in paperback @£12.50p per copy from Richard Kay Publications 80, Sleaford Road, Boston, Lincs.

Shortly there is to be a re-print of '**A Garland of Country Songs**' published by Llanerch Publishing of Lampeter. It will be available about the end of October at a cost of £12. More information from member Martin Graebe

Myths of the Middle Ages. A new edition of this title was seen in a remainder shop recently (£6.99). Ed. John Matthews -published Blandford (Cassell) 1996 - 2pp foreword by Cyril Tawney - 5pp intro by Editor + short introductory essay by him before each story (12 of the original 24 selected) - with specially commissioned colour paintings by Peter Komarnycky. At the end 3pp 'Further reading': 5 or 6 titles for each chapter - plain blue cloth covers in striking dustjacket... David Shacklock

A re-print of **Mehalah** will be available shortly and Member Becky Smith sends the following introduction:

Mehalah is a classic nineteenth-century novel, in the grand tradition of the Brontes, George Eliot and Charles Dickens. The strikingly strong echoes of Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre at certain points in the story do nothing to detract from its merit - rather they enhance and enrich this piece of high emotional drama.

The storyline is a time-honoured one - a woman caught between the overwhelming and terrifying passion of one man - which repels and challenges her in its ruthless violence -and the safe but lukewarm love of a more ordinary individual. Like Catherine Earnshaw and Scarlett O'Hara before and since, she misguidedly takes the lesser man to her heart, and brings suffering upon herself accordingly.

Baring-Gould succeeds in conveying the force of male passion without ever once overtly hinting at any sexual element. Only the symbols and the veiled allusions reveal the power of Elijah's feelings. In an age before Freud, we have a dazzling array of Freudian situations. This is true from the first chapter, where Rebow voices a desire to pull off Mehalah's body-hugging guernsey, so as to wear it himself.

Interwoven into the dark melodrama of the story are several comic passages reminiscent not only of Dickens but of Rabelais and even Shakespeare. The cameo of the burdened Reverend Rabbit, with his fourteen children, is especially engaging, given that at the time of writing

Baring-Gould had a modest five or six children of his own -and then proceeded to emulate Mr Rabbit by bringing the total to an identical fourteen. There are many other pleasing diversions: the character of Charles Pettican, especially, conjures many a Dickensian forebear.

Elijah Rebow's character, however, is the central element in the book. The fact that he is

named after the greatest of the Old Testament prophets must surely be significant. He is as single-mindedly sure of his own destiny, as outspoken and as feared in his small Essex community as his

namesake was on a wider Biblical stage. But despite the changes that take place in the novel, the reader never forgets the casual cruelty with which Rebow gets his own way, and the breathtaking enormity of his selfishness. Mehalah's courage in standing up to him ensures her a place in the canon of strong women in fiction, but her position remains essentially that of a victim.

The book was published in 1880, after three publishers had rejected it. Controversy raged from the first. Baring-Gould was compared not only to Emily and Charlotte Bronte, but to Thomas Hardy and R.D.Blackmore. Public opinion was divided, but sales were substantial. Mehalah has always been regarded as Baring-Gould's greatest novel. It is a sustained work of imagination and high drama. The pace is hectic, and the central relationship between the two main figures is shown in fearless detail.

There is as much to enjoy in it today as there was 120 years ago.

Becky.

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