

rather than official fears of convict disturbances that explains why early Australian gold discoveries failed to issue in a gold rush. A statistical summary of world gold production and of the individual contribution of the various gold regions would have made a useful appendix. Such material is at hand in Robert H. Ridgway's *Summarized Data of Gold Production*, Washington, 1929. Finally, in one other respect *The Gold Rushes* is unique. It is surely the only book on the subject which refuses to employ the fine graphic material available. A single sketch, daguerreotype or photograph can often illustrate, better than several pages of text, a mining technique or a mining appliance.

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The West Coast Gold Rushes. By P. R. May. Pegasus Press, Christchurch. Second Revised Edition, 1967. 560 pp. N.Z. price: \$5.00.

WHEN this book was first published in 1962 it was received with acclaim by reviewers and public. Its excellent production, its ample size, its wealth of illustration and merits as a piece of historical writing, combined with a remarkably low price (\$3.75), all helped promptly to sell out the first edition.

Textually, the second edition is almost identical with the first. The most substantial additions are a new and useful appendix on the discovery of the Haast Pass, an extension of the admirable bibliography to bring it up to 1966, and more photographs to expand the already excellent illustrations. There is one notable subtraction from the earlier edition: the omission of the detailed source notes to every chapter, which occupied twenty pages of the 1962 edition.

It is a pleasure (and a welcome duty in a carping age) to underline Mr. May's very considerable achievements. The book is a prodigy of dedicated, scrupulously careful, exhaustive and extremely well-organised historical research: it shows a remarkably detailed command of the sources; and those who proffered the few corrections referred to in Mr. May's note to the second edition must have been few indeed. Scholarly integrity at this basic level is a very notable virtue — there is no superficial skimping in the basic construction of this book. Further, it exhibits the author's warm human sympathy, indeed loving involvement with his subject, an attractive, pleasing thing which comes across strongly to the reader. And it has many characteristics to commend it with the *genre* of picaresque narrative local history — facts, masses of them; colour, much of it strong and vivid; and a good human story. Within the limits of this *genre* the book is excellent, indeed surely a model of its kind.

Nevertheless, this *genre* has notable limitations, in my view serious ones, so far as the discipline of history is concerned. Given that what Mr. May has done he has done very well, what are the shortcomings of his enterprise?

Mr. May's book is that of a romantic and an optimist, and is not without a tinge of bluff heartiness. It is not a book beset by problems, or agonizings: it accepts things as they were and does not probe or question much. As such it falls into a category of historical writing which has a limited,

if pleasurable utility, largely that of entertainment, recreation. What of the historian as social critic, interpreter of the past to the present? *The West Coast Gold Rushes* has a curious air of isolation about it, a slice of the past preserved in antiquarian's aspic. This is particularly evident in the last chapter 'The Prospect', where some brief effort is made to relate the book to what was to follow in West Coast history. The essential romanticism of Mr. May's approach is disconcertingly revealed in his very last paragraph: 'The diggers have not gone. Motor up the Waimea Valley some frosty night in June. Take your stand on the slopes of Scandinavian Hill. You'll find Jimmy the Slogger and Liverpool Bill, Gentleman George and Yankee Dan, all hard at work. The gullies echo to the ringing shovels, and the picks go flashing in the moonlight.'

Here, patently, is not the West Coast of the historian, but that of the dreamer and mythologist, encouraging us to visions of ghosts from allegedly happy times gone by. For a historian, Mr. May has imbibed too much of the traditional West Coast goldfield's myth — and added too much to it. Essentially, while using throughout and to considerable effect the accepted techniques of the academic historian, this book does not abandon the basic approach of those earlier accounts cited in the bibliography: it is at core a celebration, a recital of triumphs past when the Coast really lived, a scrutiny, as the blurb puts it, of 'three hectic years'. Something of the fever is in the book, but little of the wasting, of the consumption.

Anyone who appraises the West Coast today must surely wonder what is the contemporary relevance of Mr. May's book: essentially it is an escape from the present, not an illumination of it. There is little in Mr. May's book which clears away the haze which obscures the harsh other side of the goldrush coin. The rushes established a pattern of boom, exploitation and decay, of drift, insecurity and misery. The brighter side is clear in this book, a tawdry golden age, but Mr. May also had at his call the elements of a historical tragedy, the more bitter for its essential triviality, the more dismal for its enactment in drizzle, cloud and rain. The golden age is very long dead: the tragedy represents the still living historical continuum.

And if the emphasis is essentially antiquarian, what of the scale of the enterprise? The book induces an uneasy feeling that it is somehow larger than its subject. Its very magnitude (nearly 600 pages, covering a maximum population of 30,000 over three years) points to what it lacks most — economy and a sense of proportion. Proportion implies significance. What is the wider significance of this book's subject? Perhaps an allegory on the lot of man lies buried here, but it has not been disinterred. The text of this book is of a piece with its illustrations — nostalgic pictures of what is dead, vanished utterly.

Mr. May hopes that 'those who cannot forget the sound of rain on a tin roof, the smell of the bush, and the sight of the Alps will enjoy this book'. As one who has not forgotten I enjoyed his book and thank him for it. But I missed the sour smell of decay which is also of the bush, the cheerless rotting damp, and the rust on the tin roof. I missed the erosion of minds and hearts, the bitter lines etched deep in faces as well as land. Perhaps these harsh hopeless things might be better forgotten; but forgetting is not, to my mind, the historian's business.

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