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THE MERSEY

SETTING OF A FAMOUS RIVER

THE RIVER MERSEY. By WILLIAM T. PALMER. Hale. 12s. 6d.

The claim of the River Mersey to world-wide celebrity rests rather upon the circumstances of her destiny than upon such things as the length, strength and volume of her flow and the beauty of the landscape through which she passes to the sea. So far as the first-named of these points is concerned, the course of the Mersey is short and comparatively slow, and in part it is swallowed up whole by the Manchester Ship Canal; while in the matter of natural charm all the other rivers of Lancashire are as well or better endowed. The Mersey has nowhere, for example, anything to compare with the upper reaches of the Ribble round Whitewell and Gisburn and the Forest of Bowland, nor of Ribble's tributary, the beautiful Hodder, beloved of the angler; nor even with lesser streams like the Wyre above Garstang, or the lovely Lune where it leaves Westmorland.

Yet the name of Mersey is known to thousands who have not so much as heard of her sisters; for Merseyside means Liverpool, just as Clydeside first and foremost means Glasgow and Thames-side the port of London. The Clyde, however, would be notable for its scenery and its romantic associations even without its docks and its shipping, just as the Thames would be famous for its beauty and its history if it never reached London.

But the Mersey, commerce and industry apart, is a river of little distinction—a pleasantly flowing pastoral stream between fat pastures in its lower reaches, fed by a score or so of babbling brooks that take their rise in the Lancashire and Derbyshire moors.

Mr. Palmer finds the destiny which has made the Mersey famous entirely deplorable—so much so that he turns away as soon as possible from Liverpool and its docks, and finds no place in his chapters on bird life for any mention of the heraldic "Liver bird." He prefers to linger among moorland yesterdays and by such stretches of river scenery as have escaped, in part at least, the defilement of industrialism.

There could be few regions more wild, when once the beaten tracks are left behind, than that in which the Mersey rises, and such stretches as that which bears the somewhat sinister name of "Featherbed Moss" have swallowed up incautious ramblers for days on end. Mr. Palmer recalls days on Blackstone Edge, before the coming of the motor-car, when the traffic was "nobbut the carriers comin' and goin'." Here, by the way, one must enter a protest against Mr. Palmer's description of the "Moorcock" Inn, of grim memory, as "Bill o' Jack's." "Bill's o' Jack's" the place has always been in genuine Lancashire speech, and will be until the standardization of the language has exterminated dialect for good and all.

Mr. Palmer's pleasantly discursive pages contain a wealth of information concerning the river and its tributaries, all of which, incidentally, helped to turn the first wheels of Lancashire's industrial development. One notes, however, some rather unexpected errors and omissions: the Grants, Dickens's "Cheeryble Brothers," were associated not with Holcombe but with Summerseat, across the valley, where Grant's Tower, so familiar to Lancashire holiday-makers, still stands. It is also surprising to find no reference to Lancashire's oldest Hunt, the Holcombe Harriers, an institution with an interesting history and many time-honoured associations.

Finally, some mention might well have been included of those no less typical Lancashire institutions, the angling clubs, whose members may so often be seen engaging in Homeric contests for copper kettles—for some reason the invariable reward of the successful canal fisherman—on the banks of "t' cut."

The illustrations are good and well chosen; but Mr. Palmer's map-maker has served him none too well. A really good walker's map, especially of the moorland districts, would add much to the usefulness of the book.

Hale Lighthouse with Frodsham Hills in the background, from "The River Mersey"