

On the Back Cover

Fred Shepherd

The frequent publisher's practice of advertising other books from their stable on the back cover of an otherwise beautifully produced volume has always annoyed me. This is particularly true when one has purchased an almost mint copy of a first edition as I believe that the work of an important writer should not be associated with other books, most of which are soon forgotten.

Jonathan Cape, for example, used the whole back cover of *The Pathway* to describe *The Strange Case of Miss Annie Spragg* by Louis Bromfield, author of *A Good Woman* etc., and a most inappropriate companion for Henry Williamson. *The Pathway* is, however, advertised on the back cover of *The Village Book* with long quotations from V.C. Squire in the *Observer* and Ralph Straus in the *Sunday Times*. Obviously this is acceptable, as is the description of *The Beautiful Years* on the back cover of *Dandelion Days*, especially as the association with *The Pathway* is also explained.

Putnam list three new publications on the reverse of *Goodbye West Country* which is a pity, for the rest of the dust jacket is most interesting with a most unusual portrait of Henry against a typical West Country scene. Strangely the artist's name is not recorded.

Of the three books described one can perhaps ignore *Giant Fishes, Whales and Dolphins* by J.R. Norman and E.C. Fraser, and also *My Scottish Youth* by R.H. Bruce Lockhart, even though it was recently disclosed that the author was at one time a secret agent of the British Government set the task of assigning Lenin. The other book *Life on a Farm in the Ngong Hills* by Baroness Karen Blixen, appears equally obscure until one realises that this is in fact *Out of Africa* — a book recently made into a most spectacular film with Robert Redford and Meryl Streep as stars, and shown on Television over the last Christmas period. The film actually gives credit to the author under her pseudonym of Isak Dinesen. It is a wonderful film which has no doubt caused many to search out the original novel, much to the delight of the publishers, Jonathan Cape. *Tarka the Otter*, of course, enjoyed a similar success after the film was first shown a few years ago.

A similar successful revival occurred at Faber when a small book of verses by T.S. Eliot was used as the basis for the hit musical 'Cats'. The income from that source alone is said to be over £1 million a year and no doubt encouraged the directors to mount their recent successful management buy-out. Henry would be pleased to learn that relatives of his old friend Walter de la Mare (a *Chronicle* character) and the widow of his reader at Faber, T.S. Eliot, combined to prevent this famous publishing name going to an American concern. Faber thus becomes one of only a few established British publishing houses remaining independent. Let us hope that one day an imaginative producer will realise the potential of *The Pathway* so that this once highly acclaimed novel will again become a best seller. But who could play the part of Willie Maddison you will no doubt ponder? Certainly not Robert Redford!

I also wonder whether Henry Williamson's many books have been advertised on the back covers of other writers' novels but will probably hear from Stephen Clarke or George Heath that many members already collect such interesting items.

[This would seem to be a subject capable of initiating copious further study and correspondence, which I will await with eager anticipation. *Ed.*]