

The Sea in Poetry and Ballad

THE reprint of Masfield's "A Sailor's Garland" (Macmillan) makes one of the very best of anthologies again available. In his introductory essay the English poet writes:

I have said that one of the joys the sea gives is the joy of unrest. This joy has been expressed in poetry during the last three generations, so perfectly that I have no need to indicate particular names. The glory and the beauty of the water have been hymned in glorious and lovely verse. I wish to express my gratitude to those living poets who have allowed me to quote their poems in that section of this anthology which treats of the beauty and wonder of the sea. I am confident that when the poetry of our time is reckoned up it will be said that one of its chief triumphs is that it has proclaimed the majesty and glory of the dominion of water.

And so, we are grateful to him for bringing together these great, nobly moving poems, and for writing so many verses himself, which he quite naturally does not here include. In some ways the most interesting part of the book is that devoted to a discussion of and a reprinting of "Chanties". I have never heard sailor men singing a chanty at their work. It must be impressive both as sight and sound, and the songs themselves are simple, naive, with a curious beauty of their own. It is from Walt Whitman's "Song for All Seas, All Ships" that one is tempted to quote here:

To-day a rude brief recitative,
Of ships sailing the seas, each with its
 special flag or ship-signal,
Of unnamed heroes in the ships—of waves
 spreading and spreading afar as the
 eye can reach,
Of dashing spray, and the winds piping and
 blowing,
And out of these a chant for the sailors of
 all nations,
Fitful, like a surge.
Of sea-captains young or old, and the
 mates, and of all intrepid sailors,

Of the few, very choice, taciturn, whom
 fate can never surprise nor death
 dismay,
Pick'd sparingly without noise by thee old
 ocean, chosen by thee,
Thou sea that pickest and cullest the race
 in time, and unitest nations,
Suckled by thee, old husky nurse, embody-
 ing thee,
Indomitable, untamed as thee.

To turn from this to "Ballads of a Beachcomber" (Holt) is rather terrifying. There was a certain quality about the jingles in Randolph H. Atkin's "The Spell of the Tropics" that recommended them, but there seems very little excuse for the addled sentiments and poorly expressed thoughts of this later book.

Far, far better verse there is in "Anchors Aweigh" (Norman, Remington), collected verses written by midshipmen of the United States navy. If sentiment sometimes overshadows beauty, it is not to be wondered; but we can know now that our navy has its bards.

—J. F.