
PAPERBOUNDS

AKENFIELD: Portrait of an English Village. By Ronald Blythe. Pantheon reprint, 1980. 318 pp. \$3.95

"Freedom," muses a 21-year-old Akenfield pig-farmer, "is getting up at 6:30 every morning, having a wash and breakfast and being outside by seven to start feeding." In this 1969 history of a rural Suffolk village just 90 miles from London, British novelist Blythe, an East Anglian himself, airs the pleasures and limitations of life in a private, much romanticized society. Blythe talked with 49 of the 298 villagers—farmers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, a vicar, and even a poet and a painter. Their frank exchanges reveal inextricable friendships and the satisfactions of working with the soil, but also a suspicion of books and new ideas, pettiness, and an unwillingness to meet the outside world. The village is hardly the bucolic England of legend. Farm earnings are low, most residents are poor, and many young people flee to the city. Once, life in Akenfield was "all obedience." Now "the village is so quiet . . . nobody walks about."

COMEDY. Edited by Wylie Sypher. Johns Hopkins reprint, 1980. 260 pp. \$4.95

Comedy is serious business to English novelist George Meredith, French philosopher Henri Bergson, and U.S. critic Sypher. Meredith (1828–1909), in this volume's first long essay, argues that comedy—especially the witty and sophisticated comedy of manners—saves us from complacency. When characters on a stage are caught "drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly," he writes, we laugh—and recognize our own follies. Bergson (1859–1941) believes that the comic spirit picks away at the "rigidity in society" that prevents us from thor-

oughly appreciating individuality. We chuckle when a parson sneezes during a sermon, because our attention is drawn from the soul to the body. Unlike Meredith, who states that only those who care about people can appreciate comedy, Bergson theorizes that humor demands a "momentary anesthesia of the heart." Sypher, however, claims that both Europeans oversimplify the subject. To him, life today is irrational; its essential absurdity is inherently (and bitterly) funny. Sypher's view of humor as "a sign of desperation," of "man's revolt, boredom, and aspiration," chills the reader who, guided by Bergson and Meredith, has come to see comedy as a measure of society's mental health.

WOMEN AND MEN ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL. By John Mack Faragher. Yale reprint, 1980. 281 pp. \$6.50

"On three farms out of four," an 1862 Department of Agriculture report concluded, "the wife works harder, endures more." Woman's lot was no better on the wagon trails that led from Missouri to California in the 19th century. Faragher's study of diaries and travel narratives written by men and women on treks westward won the 1980 Frederick Jackson Turner Award for history. Men, he finds, had one principal task—"getting the wagons and the family safely through to the coast." Typically, their accounts were terse statements of fact: "Fri 10 made this day 14 and encamped at the Willow Springs good water but little grass 3 Bufaloes killed. . . ." While the men hunted or talked politics around the campfire, women concerned themselves with cooking, mending, washing clothes, and child-rearing. Lamented one: "Some women have very little help about the camp, being obliged to get the wood and water