

In the Valley of the Maori

Greenstone, by Sylvia Ashton-Warner (Simon & Schuster. 217 pp. \$4.50), concerns a three-quarters-white Maori princess who belongs emotionally to her European ancestors and spiritually to the tribal chief who is her great-grandfather. Elinor Baumbach is a free-lance editor who often comments on today's fiction.

By ELINOR BAUMBACH

ANYONE who has read Sylvia Ashton-Warner's most successful books, *Teacher* and *Spinster*, might pretty well predict the milieu and tone of her latest novel. Again we have the clash of the Maori and white cultures in New Zealand, the charmingly impossible children caught with photographic intensity in moments of overwhelming exultation or abysmal childish sorrow. Again the conflicting mores of white and black are treated knowingly and intelligently, but in the irritatingly comforting, arch, romantic, impetuous manner which, presumably, thousands of Ashton-Warner readers have come to know and love.

In *Greenstone* we have the story of Richard Considine, a figure of "frailty, elegance . . . mystery." His wife, mother of his thirteen children, is a person of earthy and "indestructible vitality" (another problem of communication). Considine is a crippled recluse, once a celebrity, now supported in a remote valley by his schoolmistress wife, who not only bears all those children but also chops wood, washes clothes, keeps school, and gives piano lessons (in her spare time). We cannot judge her termagant rumbling. The poor woman is unpleasant, but oh so put upon!

Considine is not only ruined and crippled, but endlessly articulate. He tells his children long, allegorical stories, in true pedagogical fashion leaving his listeners to stumble on the meanings for themselves. Predictably enough, only the Considine grandchild, Huia, a three-quarters-white Maori princess, is able to understand her relative's elliptical fairy tales.

The tendency toward a simplistic glorification of the natural, therefore correct, response of the Maori is manifest in *Teacher*. In *Greenstone*, however, the child is conditioned to allegory by her great-grandfather, the chief of the Te Renga Renga tribe. From him Huia

learns the beautiful and compelling tribal chants that preserve intact the history of the Maori people and which powerfully accent the book. The chief, at first another Noble Savage, grows in density as the child Huia slowly accepts him as history, as the past which, incorporated, becomes the truth of the present. There is no sentimentalizing of this relationship. Emotionally Huia belongs to the Considines, spiritually to the old chief for whom she will wear the ancestral greenstone. For him she is tradition made flesh, the carrier of his sacred heritage.

Mrs. Ashton-Warner is, one feels, a good person. She admires passionate intellect and detests bigotry and sterile provincialism. She loves and beautifully describes her lush New Zealand countryside. So where does she go wrong in this at times absurdly hoked-up book? It is, calamitously, her sense of novel-writing—of dramatic event—that is quite off. The landlord, threatening the Considines, says, "I want me money!"

Compassion for the Comanche

A Woman of the People, by Benjamin Capps (Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 242 pp. \$4.95), telling of a white girl reared among nomadic Indians in Texas, treats the Comanches as human creatures, possessing neither super-nobility nor exaggerated simplicity. Brian Garfield is the author of *The Vanquished* and other novels about the Southwest.

By BRIAN GARFIELD

WHEN a novel of the Old West escapes the triteness of horse-opera formula, publishers and reviewers alike stampede to label it "A Novel" in order to avoid the stigma that brands the "Western." For, unfortunately, the preponderance of hackneyed, juvenile Westerns tars the whole genre with one brush. Nevertheless, it does seem a shame that the publisher of a work like *A Woman of the People* must be embarrassed to call it a Western—because this unaffected and affecting novel is the Western at its best.



Sylvia Ashton-Warner—"trenchant."

Considine's old flame, presumably a handsome, worldly woman, confronts her former lover—now the father of those thirteen—and weeps, "You owe me a son, you bloody traitor . . . you're a meanie."

Finally, we understand that Mrs. Ashton-Warner is not a novelist at all, but an excellent schoolmistress, firm, trenchant, and passionate. It is when she tries to imagine—to create fiction—that she dissolves into bathos. In *Greenstone* only the Maori have a significant reality, for we are being taught creatively about them. All else is disfigured by the stereotype of romance.

Woman is both a historical novel and novel history. The story is straightforward: a ten-year-old white girl, taken captive by Comanches in 1854, tries desperately to avoid becoming an Indian while she grows up as part-slave, part-adopted daughter of an Indian family.

Benjamin Capps's plot is essentially just that. Yet it is difficult to recall a warmer, fuller treatment of life among the warrior horsemen of the Southern Plains. This reviewer was relieved to find the Indian point depicted without the super-nobility or exaggerated primitive simplicity of so many such stories. Although few emerge as well-defined individual characters, the author's Comanches are human creatures—no more and no less.

Capps writes of the sorrows and the joking of the Indians during the final generation of their nomadic life in the West. He brings out the hardships of winter life on the bitter Texas plains, the heat of inhospitable summers; with equal skill he conveys the beauty and vastness of the land.

He writes of the last days of an aged Indian who goes off to die like "an old

horse that is too feeble and crippled to keep up with the herd any more," and of the women—impassive on the surface—who, privately in the night, cry over the old man. Capps is at his best when he shows us the white man as the red man saw him: a vague, unrealized figure whose actions (fighting a Civil War, making incomprehensible treaties, slaughtering an entire tribe's horse-herd to force the tribe to come to the reservation) made no sense.

Without pidgin English or stereotyped white villains, without patronizing or condescension, Capps creates a vibrantly convincing Indian band and allows the reader to see the mid-nineteenth century as the Indian saw it. From a historical standpoint, the book's most important point is that the Indian knew even less about the white man than the white knew about the Indian: red-white relations were characterized by an absence of mutual communication or understanding.

As history, *A Woman of the People* is both vivid and valid. As a novel, it is a gripping story of a maturing woman's struggle to decide her place in the world. Mr. Capps's sparse, uncomplicated style makes the book a poignant work, well worth reading.

Wind in the Wells

By Jeannette Nichols

THE wells are chewing
their dark water
and the wind
is asking
to be let in

at last having learned to fear the dark

and in the dried grasses
rodents bring whispers
in from the fields
to hide in cellars.

Only the moon knows its loneliness
and does what it can
in spite of it

while mud-ruts in the road
harden like worry
and frost bleeds into the ground.

Just at midnight
the moon looks into each well
separately,
hesitates like cream

married to the dark beneath,

and the wind is a woman
moving on to other
entrances.

40

A Small Flame for Sappho

The Laughter of Aphrodite, by Peter Green (Doubleday, 275 pp. \$4.95), is an imaginary autobiography of Sappho of Lesbos. Lionel Casson, who is professor of classics at New York University, has published numerous translations from Latin and Greek.

By LIONEL CASSON

SOMETIME around 600 B.C. there lived on the Greek island of Lesbos a remarkable woman, a poet of such rare quality that so discriminating a critic as Plato could refer to her as the "tenth muse." She wrote poems of all sorts, but her most renowned were the flaming verses she addressed—as so much of ancient love poetry was—to a beloved of the same sex. And, though she wrote voluminously, through bad luck (no doubt abetted by the Church, which for the long centuries of the Middle Ages was the sole guardian of literature), practically all of her work has been lost. We have but two or three short poems in their entirety, and pathetic fragments of several hundred others, fragments whose haunting beauty leaves us dumbstruck at the thought of the treasure we have lost.

Like so many of the great figures of ancient literature, Sappho is hardly more than a name; we know little about her beyond what can be gleaned from her poems. Nor do we know very much more about the general history of her times. Despite the unpromising scantiness of material, Peter Green, novelist, classical scholar, and now a resident of the very isle where "burning Sappho loved and sung," has courageously attempted a fictional autobiography of the poet, her story from girlhood to her last moments as she might have told it.

Byron's adjective is singularly apt. A poet who could describe a fit of jealousy in such words as

a delicate fire runs in
my limbs; my eyes
are blinded and my ears
thunder

wrote in the very white heat of passion. Green's portrait captures the flinty egotism that must be part of such a nature, the unthinking arrogance. His Sappho is not likable, not at all someone you sympathize with, and this, I think, is as it should be. But somehow, in his



Alcaeus and Sappho with instruments. From a wine vessel now in Munich.

extended narrative, which necessarily moves from year to year and at times from day to day, the unique essence of this fiery spirit loses its brilliance and heat: for all his ardent prose, Green's Sappho glows rather than burns, and then only fitfully.

If the emotional part of Green's portrait is somewhat lackluster, there are other colors that are patently false. However little we know of the politics and economics and social relations of Sappho's age, thanks to archeology we know something of the physical setting of its life—and it is not what Green has recreated. He has Sappho's crucial girlhood sacrifice to Aphrodite take place by candlelight inside the goddess's temple; but a Greek temple was a mere chamber to house a cult image, and all sacrifices took place upon an outdoor altar in the clean, bright air. He has her walk through houses that are built with arched corridors (not invented until a millennium later) and decorated with ancestral busts (a custom typically Roman and inconceivable among Greeks of her age). He has her sit for a portrait (portrait-painting lay over two centuries in the future), has her eat meals flavored with pepper (only a rare medicinal substance until many centuries later), has her do many other things she could not possibly have done.

The age was much more primitive and earthy than Green has imagined. So was Sappho.

SR/March 19, 1966