

The Adventures of Running Water

RUAN. By Bryher. 191 pp. New York: Pantheon Books. \$3.50.

By HORACE GREGORY

CONTEMPORARY readers of the historical novel have found increasing pleasure in the writings of Bryher (a gifted Englishwoman, born Winifred Ellerman). The present volume is the fifth in a series of short novels that began with "The Fourteenth of October." That first one was a story of the year 1066, written as though told by a Saxon boy who had witnessed the end of Saxon rule and the coming of Norman power.

Each of the four novels she has written since has been chosen from an equally dramatic moment of history: "The Player's Boy," about the decline of Elizabethan glory into the darkness of James I's reign; "Roman Wall," about the last scenes of Roman civilization in third-century Switzerland; "Gate to the Sea," dealing with the courage of the Greeks who chose exile rather than barbarian dominance in fourth-century B. C. Paestum; and now "Ruan." This new story takes place in the sixth century A. D., in Cornwall, Ireland and the Scilly Isles. It was a time when old Celtic doctrines were giving way to primitive Irish Christianity as well as to the forces of the pagan North. Each book represents a period of shifting faiths and mores and the courage of a few against spiritual darkness.

Ruan (the old Celtic word for running water) is the name of the hero in Bryher's latest tale. The boy, nephew of a Druid priest, has his imagination fired by hopes of an adventurous life at sea. Ward of

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an old and dying king, tutored in priestly rites of an old order, Ruan did not find it easy to achieve his adventurous hopes. His desires for seeking a world beyond his uncle's priestly duties were furthered by hearing a Cornish harper recite an ancient version of Sir Gawain's wanderings. Ruan's story is the story of growing up and of slow



Bryher.

self-knowledge with perils on every side: perils of the changing mores of sixth-century Cornwall, perils engendered by faithless friends, elderly caution and advice, perils of nature—the fall of night, the winters, bog land or storm-swept beaches, and beyond these, the ever-present, dangerous attraction of the sea.

Running away to sea is an old Celtic and British story—but not as Bryher retells it in this book. Bryher's novels are parables of life itself: of the past, yes; but also of our own uncertain present and tomor-

row. Her novels haunt the reader, and in "Ruan" she evokes the austere mysteries of Sir Gawain's search in the harper's recital at a country fair. This search in Bryher's version has a deathless air. At the end of the book, the sailor, grown to manhood, looks back on his adventures:

"Destiny had a passion, I thought, for treating mankind as children treat the shells they scatter haphazardly around them after a morning on the beach. It was useless now to turn my life over in my mind, there was no straight line, it lost itself in something perilously like our swamps, doubled back, went forward and arrived eventually at a point that was different from my original goal. * * * My way was with the wanderers. We were the sea's children and, if our voyages seemed to cross and circle without apparent purpose, we should understand the pattern in good time."

Ruan has lost none of his courage; his reflection is a proof of his maturity—and also proof of a timeless quality in Bryher's writing. In reading "Ruan," a friend of mine remarked that Bryher's novels have an enduring accent that reminds one of Turgenev's famous story, "Bezhin Meadow." This is not to say that Bryher emulates Turgenev, and no one in his right mind would call Turgenev a historical novelist. The parallel is one of instinctive art in storytelling: economy of phrasing in a paragraph, an unforced union of atmosphere, action and meaningful imagery—and this explains the reason why discerning critics have recognized Bryher's achievement. My friend is right. Her novels are among the classics of our time.

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