Books

Comedy Writer Creates 'New Dimension'

By RAYMOND E. PALMER
Of the Associated Press

LONDON—Spike Milligan, writer and actor, lay in a kind of concrete coffin in his dressing room.

He was dressed in tattered old clothes. An untidy gray beard straggled over his lower face. His eyes were sad. They stared upward toward a grimy window that looked out on the River Thames.

In the grime on the window his finger had traced the words:

"On a clear day you can see the other side of the glass."

Milligan calls the coffin-like structure his relaxing bin. He lies there snatching an occasional nap, thinking weird thoughts that enrich the English world of comedy.

"I'm not really a comedian," said Milligan. "I'm a writer who has found out how to string words together in a way that makes people laugh."

Some of those words strung together with a 24-year-old writer named John Antrobus produced one of the biggest recent hits of the British theater, "The Bed-sitting Room."

Milligan's sense of humor is primarily a sense of the ridiculous. One theme at which he constantly plugs away is bureaucracy.

"People who regard other people as numbers or tickets or so many holes in a card have to be lampooned to let the cleansing power of laughter get at them," he said.

Not surprisingly, his attitude to life gets Milligan into some way-out situations. When he applied for a renewal of his British passport recently he was told that technically he was a stateless person.

He was born in Ahmadnager, India, April 16, 1918, where his Irish-born father was serving in the British Army. The father had not qualified for British nationality and therefore Milligan did not qualify.

"They disowned me, just like that," said Milligan. "I suppose it was their way of getting back at me. So I took out Irish nationality. Now I'm Irish — and a fully fledged rebel."

His name really is Terrence Alan Patrick Sean Milligan. Everyone calls him Spike, but no one knows why.

He was the originator of a top radio program called "The Goon Show," which ran for eight years and introduced two other British stars, Peter Sellers and Harry Secombe.

This avante garde comedy show convulsed audiences throughout the Commonwealth. Peter Sellers is convinced that Milligan is a genius, a comedian years ahead of his time.

But he is utterly unpredictable. His scraggy beard and ragged clothes are part of his war against the human race, says Sellers. "He likes to shock people."

Milligan admits it. "You have to shock people sometimes to wake them up. They get into a rut and don't want to think. If I couldn't shock them into thinking and laughing. I think I'd despair of the human race."

Spike Milligan in Relaxing Bin

Reprints Portray Army Life

NEW YORK (AP) — Mark Twain wasn't the only Western traveler who distrusted, with humorous horror, the bills of fare at wayside eating places.

The descriptions he wrote in "Roughing It" are reflected in two reprints by J. P. Lippincott in its Keystone Western Americana series, "Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border" by Randolph B. Marcy, $2.75, and "Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevadas" by Clarence King, $2.50.

Marcy, an army officer provides this account of a meal ordered for a sickly friend who went West for his health:

"The dishes before us consisted of fried bacon floating in grease, some corn bread in the shape of hand grenades, and a quantity of glutinous, half-baked hot biscuit, neither of which seemed calculated to tempt the appetite of the gentleman from the East, who called for toast."

King, telling of a meal in California, said the food consisted of "beans swimming in fat, meats slimed with pale ropy gravy, and over everything a faint mongol odor—the flavor of moral degeneracy and of a disintegrated race." He means there were Chinese cooks.

A U.S. geologist, King produced his book in 1872 and tells in careful, elegant English of his mountain climbing exploits. Anyone interested in the High Sierra will find it extremely interesting.

Marcy, whose son-in-law was Gen. George B. McClellan, was an export explorer, map maker and hunter as well as a gifted writer and reporter. His book, first printed in 1866, provides a good look at the untamed West. He saw the Indians as savages, but as savages who were being badly mistreated by the Indians.

It is a shame Marcy's sense of history was not stronger. He gives only a sketchy account of his meeting with Jim Bridger, the famous mountain man. If Marcy had taken time, he could have provided material toward a really good biography of Bridger.

A book by J. Cecil Alter, University of Oklahoma Press, $5.95, attempts such a biography but falls short. Alter's "Jim Bridger" waters down too much the essence of a man who was as wild as Taos Lightning whisky. It also says there was a report in 1790 of white Canadians reaching the Pacific. Alexander Mackenzie, the first man to reach the Pacific north of the Spanish settlements, didn't do that until July 22, 1793.

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