

Robin MAYHEAD, *Understanding Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 1965, 189 pp., 25s.

Mr. Mayhead, who is a lecturer in English at the University of Lagos and has also taught in Ceylon and in Ghana, is well informed on the difficulties met by students of English literature in the Commonwealth countries. His book is mainly intended for these students and their teachers, though it can be a valuable guide for all those who are interested in literature. Mr. Mayhead's purpose is to show how literature must be approached in order to be enjoyed and understood, and not merely studied as a 'subject' for examinations. He explains in what way literature contributes to, and preserves, the vitality of language. He shows how good imaginative literature can be distinguished from inferior achievements, and he demonstrates that a lack of 'background knowledge' is no obstacle to the understanding of the literary works of a particular country. As an interpretation of human life, literature is relevant to all human beings and to their experience of living ; it is also a means of extending that experience. Mr. Mayhead illustrates this by means of detailed analyses of representative works in order to throw light on basic literary techniques. His book contains a chapter on the ballad, another on novels by Jane Austen, George Eliot, Dickens and Hardy, in which he explains how the novelist's central purpose can be grasped through his use of language and how the elements of fiction can be welded together into a tightly organized whole. Similarly, he describes the elements of poetry and gives an extended analysis of a sonnet by Donne as well as briefer analyses of poems of different periods from Spenser to Eliot. — H. Maes-Jelinek.

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