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ION IDRIESS DOES IT AGAIN

A Finely Interesting and Descriptive Story of the Far Nor'-West

THE latest volume by Mr. Ion L. Idriess, *"OVER THE RANGE"* (Angus and Robertson), recalls in some respects an earlier book of his—"Man Tracks"—in that they are both accounts of journeys undertaken by the author in the company of members of the Mounted Police during patrol work. However, whereas "Man Tracks" dealt with the country and people of the Northern Territory, "Over the Range" covers Mr. Idriess's recent experiences while accompanying a Nor'-West Mounted Police patrol for twelve hundred miles through the Kimberleys, north of the King Leopold Range. And in other respects, too, the books have little in common, beyond that they both make excellent reading and are further evidence of the author's fine capacity for telling a good story.

As Mr. Idriess tells us, the parallel barriers of the King Leopold Range for years defied penetration, even by the finest bushmen on earth. To the south they wall off the West Kimberley, of which Derby is the little cattle-port. To the east stretches the East Kimberley. For a thousand miles south of both stretches the remainder of the great State of Western Australia. Beyond the King Leopolds, the extreme north-western corner of Australia is vaguely known as Nor'-West Kimberley. Probably not more than twenty white men live "over the range," the country being sparsely inhabited by the aborigines, practically the last survivors of the Stone Age men, who, despite the fact that everything possible is being done by the few whites resident in those parts to save them, are gradually dying out.

Mr. Idriess accompanied this par-

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Mr. Idriess accompanied this particular patrol in 1933, and he tells us that he has recently received a letter from a northern mounted policeman who patrolled the same country some few months ago which absolutely staggered him. In that short time a surprising number of the aborigines he met there four years ago have died. "Time has allowed the aboriginal to roam undisturbed for thousands, possibly millions, of years. Now—not in a thousand years, or ten, but almost in months—Time is wiping the aboriginal from the face of the earth. . . So, if we really do mean to save the last of the stone-age men, we must race Time."

The "White P'leece"

THE object of the patrol of which Mr. Idriess was a member was to see if all was well with the few scattered settlers over the range, and to arrest half a dozen native murderers whose killings had frightened their own tribesmen into soliciting "white p'leece" protection. The authorities interfere as little as possible with the customs of the semi-wild and wild tribes, believing it the better policy to allow them to settle their own disputes; but when an appeal for assistance is made, then action must be taken, and it is in the hands of that gallant little band of mounted policemen who maintain order in that wild

of mounted policemen who maintain order in that wild stretch of country to see that that action is both prompt and tempered with justice. When the patrol left Derby, the question which most engaged the author's mind was as to how on earth one policeman, a couple of trackers, and himself as a sort of supercargo could possibly find, much less catch, those wild men who were wanted and who had spent their lives in that barely accessible country.

The difficulties to be faced seemed well-nigh insurmountable. Not only did the leader of the patrol have to match his cunning with the cunning of those whom he sought, not only did he have to seek the fugitives in country which, although known to him, was as an open book to the aborigines, but he did not even have the element of surprise to assist him. By the aid of smoke signals his movements were communicated from one tribe to another and his visit was anticipated weeks, sometimes months, before he arrived. Thus those who were sought were given ample opportunity to go into hiding before the arrival of the law.

He had, however, two definite factors in his favour. The first was that no one knew for whom he was seeking or what was the object of the patrol. For all the natives knew to the contrary—except the informers, and they, of course, would not make public the fact that they had been in communication with the police—it might have been just an ordinary periodical visit of inspection. The second was that these mounted men, having spent the better part of their lives among the aborigines, have come to anticipate the workings of the wild man's mind and can frequently anticipate his course of action. That the patrol not only apprehended all those for whom it sought, but, in view of the distance it covered, did so in comparatively quick

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the distance it covered, did so in comparatively quick time, is striking evidence of the ability of this particular leader and of the mounted force as a whole.

"Nipper" and "Charcoal"

TOOLWANOR, alias Nipper, and Ungandongery, alias Charcoal, were two of the several aborigines wanted, although until the former "turned King's evidence" Charcoal's part in the affair was unknown. Nipper was accused of having killed a certain member of another tribe named Burrin. When he was caught after a stern chase he admitted the deed, saying that he had done it because Burrin had tried to steal his wife. With entire absence of malice he also accused Charcoal

"ON PATROL."

From "Over the Range," by Ion L. Idriess, reviewed on this page.

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of having helped him in the killing. This complicated matters, for it meant that the patrol would now have to chase the accessory; and his prowess as a bushman was only too well known. He was also something of a figure in the land, for he was a man of many parts. An old prospector, Peter Bextrum, who was encountered by the patrol, gave the author an idea of Charcoal's abilities:

> "You and Charcoal will have something in common," drawled old Peter to me—"not physically, perhaps; Charcoal is a six-footer, a man-killer, a 'proper' wild man. But he is a 'playwright,' 'actor,' and 'author,' famous throughout stone-age land," added Peter with a twinkle in his eye. "His latest play with its new songs caught on, and has been all the rage for the last two years.
>
> "You will be meeting a mining man too. You've done a lot of prospecting in your time?
>
> "Charcoal is a prospector. He mines his corroboree and war paints from the native ochre mines away in the Synott Range. For an aboriginal he is quite a miner—all done until recent years by stone-age tools."

An Aboriginal Artist

MR. IDRIESS, apropos of these remarks, tells us that the Australian aboriginal is a natural mimic, very keen on his own chanting songs, initiation rites, dances, and corroborees. Some of these last require thought and considerable time to organise, and sometimes days to perform. The blacks tell their stories in pantomime, the dressing-up for which requires no little taste and ingenuity. And there is a great deal of

symbolism throughout that to the white man who does not understand may seem in the main childish. The services of any tribesman who is an artist at dressing the actors for a corroboree are always in keen demand. But the author of a new corroboree that catches their

imagination is famous throughout the land, because the corroboree is copied and passed on from tribe to tribe.

> Thus Charcoal was a well-known man in country where he never had been and dare not go. And beyond those tribal areas his plays were "stolen" by ambitious ones, who slightly altered the corroboree to suit locality and local conditions and calmly pirated all credit. I felt quite keen to meet my fellow-author.

In the end Mr. Idriess's wish was gratified, and he was given evidence of Charcoal's prowess as a playwright. Charcoal was taken by surprise, and although he put up a hard fight he was eventually overcome. Then he submitted quite willingly, and made no bones about the part he had played in the murder of Burrin. Whilst with the patrol awaiting its return to, and his trial in, Derby, his fertile native mind conceived a new corroboree in which he was the chief figure, and a very heroic character indeed. To the great delight of quite a number of blacks, who by some unknown means had heard that he intended giving a performance, and also to the edification of Mr. Idriess, Charcoal acted the story of his arrest, his period of imprisonment, and of his ultimate triumphant return to his tribe. That his rendering of the events was not quite true to fact matters little—"the play's the thing."

Native Humour

THE aboriginal frequently possesses a keen sense of humour,

sesses a keen sense of humour, and Mr. Idriess gives several instances of this throughout his story. However, there is one tale he relates where the butt of the aboriginal wit did not appreciate the fun, and it might be added neither did the perpetrator of the joke find much humour in the outcome. There was a prospector who, when in any pain or in any way out of sorts, had the habit of expressing his feelings by making the most awful faces. These faces sent the native into ecstasies, only to his mind the occurrences were too few and far between. The aboriginal decided to speed things up a bit, and he chose the somewhat novel, if drastic, method of placing strychnine in the prospector's tea. He received full value for his money for a while, but it was purely luck that the prospector did not pass out with the frightful agony he suffered. However, when he recovered there was one aboriginal who began to wonder whether the world was such a great place to live in after all.

The "Message-Stick"

MR. IDRIESS devotes a particularly interesting chapter to the "message-stick." It has been generally supposed that message-sticks are only "play-about," the pastime of an idle hour. But the author

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about," the pastime of an idle hour. But the author has seen and gives ample proof to the contrary. These sticks usually carry a distinct message as to the arrival of someone of importance, or to make arrangements between tribes for corroborees and initiation ceremonies, or from one man to another suggesting trade in such articles as ochres, pituri, or weapons:

> The characters, or rather markings, cut or burnt into the stick are not letters. They represent objects such as hills, lagoons, rivers, moon, stars, sun, days, men and women, with dates in days of time or "moons" or seasons. The messenger must memorise the message. The stick is his bona-fides, his passport. When delivering the message he confirms it by pointing to each marking, giving its explicit memorised meaning. The message is meaningless to all but the man who marks it, the messenger who carries it, and the recipient when it has been delivered and explained. In other hands, a queerly shaped notch representing a familiar lagoon might be deciphered as to locality; the half-moon or sun might betray the time; the notches representing men and women could be distinguished, but the sense of the message would be missing.

In his volume Mr. Idriess has included several photos of these message-sticks, with an interpretation of the various signs and symbols. These are claimed by the publishers to be the first published interpretations in book form of aboriginal message-sticks.

One is beginning to experience difficulty in finding some new method of commenting upon Mr. Idriess's work. Frankly, it has got quite beyond me; I can only say that "Over the Range" is just another Idriess success. And as nothing succeeds like success, one is hardly surprised to learn that ten thousand copies of this book have already been sold!—*S.E.N.*