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Josh Billings by David B. Kesterson (review)

Joseph H. Gardner

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"very singular book of travels" Stevenson wanted to write about the Pacific. Only days before Stevenson posted the letter, his wife had written Colvin from Honolulu to say that she was "much exercised" about the project, which she called "a sort of scientific and historical impersonal thing," and heartily disapproved of. Stevenson, however, insisted that the subject of the Pacific invited the treatment he intended to give it in his book because "the nineteenth century exists there only in spots: all round, it is a no man's land of the ages, a stirabout of epochs and races, barbarisms and civilizations, virtues and crimes." If we are to take the justification seriously, we must also agree with Stevenson that it is a "strange place" which may be so described. Indeed, it is no place at all, any more than the disappearing islands Pym went looking for aboard the *Grampus* were. There is no way of knowing what Stevenson's singular travel book might have been like, because Stevenson never wrote it. Yet there are glints here and there in *Travels in Hawaii* that make it interesting to speculate.

Although Professor Day's choices for inclusion in the volume are sometimes annoyingly redundant, the work is on the whole competently edited, and the introduction is useful. If there is a second printing, an index should be added.

BEN MERCHANT VORPAHL, *The University of Georgia*

Josh Billings. By David B. Kesterson. (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1973; \$5.50.)

Given the current economics of scholarly publishing, perhaps the only press willing to venture a full-blown study of Josh Billings is Twayne. So the only volume on Billings we are likely to see for some time is a Twayne book. I suspect that no one regrets this more than David B. Kesterson. Kesterson is knowledgeable on his subject and clearly enjoys reading him and writing about him. His book is interesting, straightforward in its organization, and, on the whole, well-written, although an occasional sentence reveals that the author has absorbed more of his subject's mode of thought than he is, perhaps, aware: "The comic almanac in America . . . got its start much earlier than expected." It is, one hopes, not inconceivable that a common reader or uncommon undergraduate encountering such choice Joshisms as the advice on how to break a mule ("Commence with the head") or the observation that while "Fust appearances are ced tu be everything . . . oysters and klams will bear looking into" might want to read a general account of their creator's life and works. Kesterson's book is a satisfactory place to send them and, as such, fulfills the function of the

series in which it is included. Those interested in seeing Josh subjected to the rigors of the scholar-critic will have to await the academic articles the dust jacket promises Kesterson has afoot.

After a preliminary chapter outlining Shaw's life and career, Kesterson proceeds to examine those modes in which he worked best, the aphorism and the essay. The approach here is primarily critical and analytic. The chapters which follow on Shaw's occasional writings, jest books and almanacs are strictly descriptive, although the prose does brighten a bit with Kesterson's discovery that Josh had a surprising facility for nature poetry of a curiously eighteenth-century mode. Kesterson then recounts Shaw's career as lecturer and concludes with a chapter summarizing his critical reputation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and commenting briefly on the difficulties Josh's "phunni phellow" cacography both presented Shaw himself ("There iz just as mutch joke in bad spelling as thare iz in looking kross-eyed, and no more"; "I adopted it in a moment ov karelessness, and like a slip in chastity, the world dont let me bak tew grace agin") and still presents the modern reader.

As befits the series, the book contains little original research and few new discoveries; in fact, one at times wishes Kesterson were a little more cautious in his use of earlier writers. It is doubtful, for example, that Cyril Clemens is any more reliable a source on Billings than he is on Mark Twain. Kesterson does provide a fair amount of his own critical commentary, but here again the nature of the book he is writing leads him more often than not to summaries of previous assessments. Although aware that Josh, like most of his fellow literary comedians, was capable of clear-eyed, even subversive, criticism of American life, Kesterson himself is a little too inclined to accept at face value the myth of the "earnestness, moral fiber and philosophical outlook" of nineteenth-century village life. Similarly, while Kesterson admirably conveys both his own enjoyment of Josh and his sense of his importance and durability, he often forces his claims. Surely the saccharine sentimentality of "Hartes" does not convey "a sensitive, artistic account of a child's nature," and to compare "The Muggins Family" to James's explorations of the "International Theme" is not simply gratuitous: it ultimately does an injustice to Shaw's rather considerable achievement in the sketch. But such cavils apart, this is, on the whole, a good general introduction for non-professional connoisseurs of Josh. May their name be legion.

JOSEPH H. GARDNER, University of Kentucky