

New Trail Signs on Publishers' Row

By ROBERT WEST HOWARD, who edited "This Is the West," winner of a 1958 Spur Award as the "Best Nonfiction Western of 1957."

AGAIN this summer the High Plains will echo the snarls of bulldozers uprooting chapparel and mesquite, leveling arroyos, terracing new ponds, preparing seedbeds for new forage grasses. The result will be richer grasslands, more cattle, a little more "folding stuff" for the cowhands. A parallel reclamation program for the area's most famous by-product, the Western novel, seems to be shaping up.

But this other brush-kill and reseed operation must take place far to the east. Publishers' Row in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia in the years 1880-1900 was the birthplace of the Western. Here editors and promotion directors welded the saga pattern of the Sureshot Cowboy, the Skulking Redskin, Good's Triumph Over Evil, and the Heroine with Built-in Virtue. Three generations of competent authors have herded up this publishers' trail. Finally, new trail signs are going up along the literary Chisholm.

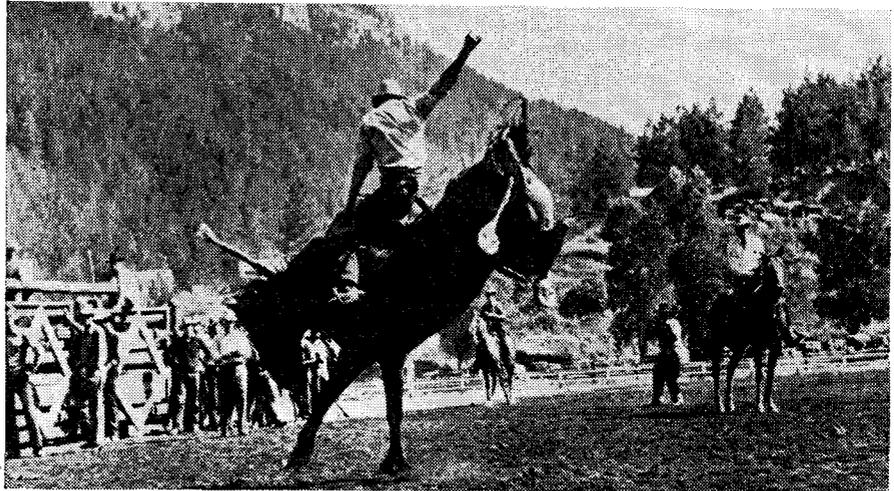
Some of them, as exciting as an emerald sweep of Suwanee Bermuda grass in the Texas Panhandle, are evident in offerings on the summer 1959 lists. The continuing realism and "mood-fix" in Jack Schaefer's "The Kean Land" (Houghton Mifflin, \$3.75) is reason for every student of Western Americana to bow politely toward the East. This is a collection of short stories and novelettes, reprinted from the slicks. But the characters walk and talk as most people still do west of the Missouri, and the word-pictures carry the sharp scents of High Plains and Cowntown.

Even richer characterization and frontier realism beckon in Dale Van Every's "The Scarlet Feather" (Holt, \$3.95). This excellent novel of the Ohio River wilderness in the decade following the Revolutionary War would not, in some quarters, be conceded "a Western." But it is—and one of the year's best. Frederick Jackson Turner fixed the literary boundaries of the American West in 1893 when he said:

Stand at Cumberland Gap and

watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by. Stand at South Pass in the Rockies a century later and see the same procession with wider intervals between.

Tracy Carter and her hazel-eyed Caleb, young Eric Jordan and Lina,



—Chicago and Northwestern Railway System.

Rodeo scene in "Days of '76" celebrations at Deadwood, North Dakota.

the lusty Slovers in Van Every's book were building toward the Pike's Peak gold rush, Dodge City, the Pony Express, and Tombstone as surely as the Longhorn cattle roaming Texas bottoms and the wild horses whinnying north from a Mexican *remuda*. Van Every's characters are in the pattern of the Old West. Novels of the caliber of "The Scarlet Feather," true in environmental detail and skilled in characterization, are the best hope for the Western's future.

Frank O'Rourke moves toward the same promising horizon in "The Far Mountain" (Morrow, \$4.95). His locale is the Spanish Southwest, in the vicinity of Taos. His theme, too, is those formative years when the Southerner broke through the Appalachian barriers.

Appraisal of these trends comes from both sides of the editorial desks.

It seems to me that the Western has developed a split-personality [writes S. Omar Barker, president of Western Writers of America].

The traditional action-adventure type, generally classed as entertainment or pastime-reading, continues to hold its own in the soft-back editions and in moderate word-lengths. But numerous competent writers of Westerns are turning out more and more historical novels of the Old West, with considerable researched substance and no little literary quality. WWA recognizes this dual character by separate Spur Awards for each year's "straight" Western and for the best "Western historical" novel.

Marc Jaffe, New American Library's trail-boss for Westerns and a student of Western Americana, goes along with this concept.

On one level [he said] the writer is primarily concerned with pure

story, using familiar plot elements. He is more concerned with pace, action, and excitement than anything else; and he is successful to the extent that he is a skilled storyteller. A second level, represented by Haycox, Short, Frazee, and a few others, rests on a firm foundation of sure-handed plotting, but ranges far and wide in subject and background, and often creates convincing characters against an authentic "set" of Western life in the nineteenth century.

The great challenge for the writer is in this category. The definitive books will come when they will come; they cannot be ordered in advance. The action story, good and bad, will always be written and should always be written. But there is a great need for more and better stories which not only have action and excitement, but also a sound basis in history and atmosphere, character and human relationships.

Cultural re-echo came from Jack
(Continued on page 45)

Urban Man and His Natural World

By JERROLD LANES, *associate editor of Natural History magazine.*

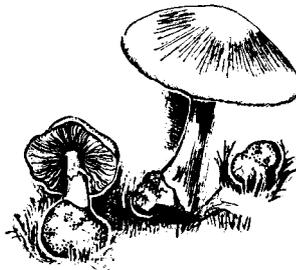
WRITING about natural history has never presented a greater challenge than it does today, and perhaps authors—and their publishers—cannot be too severely blamed for failing to meet it, since the forces at work are immense. On the one hand, life grows increasingly urban and industrial, permitting ever fewer people to claim an intimate knowledge of what is called “the world of nature”; while, on the other, biologists—using the very methods of a technological age—have amassed a great amount of highly detailed information about this natural world. The problem for the writer is to bridge the gap, presenting these findings in a thorough, yet intelligible, way.

The crisis is perhaps most acute in this country, for, emotionally, we have never outgrown the Romantic era in our attitude to nature. For the Romantics, nature was something majestic and awesome: one could not examine the way it worked, because the mystical reverence of the Romantic’s feeling stifled the scientific curiosity of his mind. And as usually happens when idealism becomes too pure, the Romantic mystique could not be related to actual conduct, which was allowed to run riot. The result was that, alongside the loftiest sentimentality, there was brutal exploitation of a rapidly expanding country, based on immediate use and short-term profit. The divorce is no less complete today. And the only factor that can reconcile these two opposing parties is biological knowledge, combining as it must a respect for the organisms it studies that will channel exploitation, and an enlightened inquiry into the “mysteries” of nature that will bring sentimentality into touch with the facts.

Peter Farb’s “*Living Earth*” (Harper, \$3.75), a book about the soil and the life that inhabits it, is, unfortunately, not a book to perform this function. The merits of “*Living Earth*” may be simply stated: it covers a lot of ground (no pun intended) and it conveys a lot of interesting information. But its failings are the inevitable complement of its

merits: it covers too much ground to convey this information with the care and thoroughness the subject deserves.

The book’s theme is of immense scope, embracing all kinds of both plants and animals, the higher as well as the lower forms, and a vast host of microscopic organisms simpler



—From “*Living Earth*.”

In teaspoon of earth, five billion bacteria and a million protozoa.

than either. Their life is superabundant (in a single teaspoonful of soil there may be as many as five billion bacteria and a million protozoa, among other organisms), and they inhabit a surprisingly huge area: the surface of the individual particles comprising an ounce of soil totals 250,000 square feet. We must be grateful to Mr. Farb for reminding us of this intriguing data; but we wonder how, knowing it, he could have hoped to embrace the entire life of the soil in 170 pages, if a teaspoonful and an ounce of earth are so rich in activity. The book is, then, just a routine once-over-lightly. The author, who is a journalist and not a biologist by profession, is informed about recent work—he knows about the high metabolism of shrews and the part plantlike, part animal-like reproduction of slime molds; but he is obliged to move along far too quickly to say much about them that we have not already read many times.

Richard Carrington has done considerably more justice to “*Elephants*” (Basic Books, \$5); and the pages in which he discusses this creature’s living relatives (the little “coney” or hyrax and the huge sea-cow) or its fossil antecedents—once one of the great populations of the earth, although today they are represented by only two dwindling species—are models of their kind, adult and thorough in their discussion of detail

yet clear and graceful in their presentation. But the chapters on elephants’ behavior are weaker. These are beautiful and noble creatures, and the great temptation in discussing them is to attribute to them the sentiments we humans feel on observing them. Mr. Carrington does not entirely avoid this error, and if his book gains in charm as a result, it rather loses in accuracy. Thus, speaking of the male elephant rebuffed by the female after mating, he tells how the male, at first “pained” by his mate’s “indifference,” soon “accepts” it with “philosophical resignation.” That is perhaps the way Mr. Carrington would feel in the circumstance, but he is not an elephant. Actually, we do not know how elephants feel, or even if they can be said to “feel” at all; and the only way to find out is to study them as they are, without veiling them in a haze of spurious humanity. In sum, nothing in the statement just quoted is known for fact, and while Mr. Carrington has reported virtually all that is known about elephant behavior, the reader must be able to discern it through a multitude of misplaced metaphors. The Swiss zoologist Adolf Port-



—From “*Elephants*.”

Kublai Khan in his wooden castle, borne on backs of four elephants.

mann has been far more scrupulous in his approach; his little book on “*Animal Camouflage*” (University of Michigan Press, \$4.50) could hardly be bettered. One of a series called the Ann Arbor Science Library, it is, like its predecessors, written by a European and is, like so many European books, much more successful at intelligent popularization than are most of our domestic products: one wishes for more such translations. The book, translated by A. J. Pomerans,