

Obituary

## Dr Verrier Elwin

IN Dr Verrier Elwin's death Indian ethnography has sustained a grievous loss, and the tribal people of India have lost a sincere and well-meaning friend. Elwin came to ethnography from tile Immanitres at Oxford, and had no formal training in anthropology. As he has himself stated. "I did not come to tribal India (now exactly twenty-seven years ago) from a school of anthropology, but from Gandhiji's ashram at Sevagram". (Preface to *Philosophy for Nefa*, 2nd edition. Shillong.1959).

"The Murias and Their Ghotul", "Religion of an Indian Tribe", "The Raiga". "The Hondo Highlander", and his other works are contributions of lasting significance to the descriptive ethnography of Indian tribes. It was indeed fortunate that he wrote so prolifically. for that is how he was able to fill some crying gaps in the ethnography of middle India. Orissa and the NEFA. Elwin wrote so well that he made anthropology popular among the general public. This popularity was also partly due to a focussing of attention on marriage, sex and art, and to the neglect of subjects of serious professional concern such as kinship, economics, law and politics. In the last four decades anthropology has become increasingly professionalized and the days of the amateur-anthropologist are gone for ever. Elwin is indeed one of the last and most distinguished of his kind.

Elwin loved the tribals and this is what endeared him to them and to many others including nationalist leaders. Hut his concern for them made him a passionate partisan' as is seen from his war-time pamphlet. "Loss of Nerve". In it he pleaded strongly for protecting the tribals from contact with the more sophisticated people from the plains. He was attacked for his views and he subsequently modified them to some extent. The isolation of tribal people is no longer a practicable policy even if it seems the most obvious one. and the only tiling to do is to extend education and other facilities to the tribes to enable them to advance to the level

of the other sections of the population. Any other policy is wrong. It is a tribute to the breadth of Elwin's mind that, in his later writings, he adopted a more realistic attitude to the problem of the tribals in India.

Elwin wrote delightfully. His "Leaves from an Indian Jungle"

is a most readable diary which he kept during his early contact with the tribal folk of Central India. A few years ago he published a collection of non-anthropological essays which included one on Sherlock Holmes and another on the human nose.

He was indeed a gifted, sensitive and dedicated man, and in his death India and Britain have lost a 'bridge-builder.'



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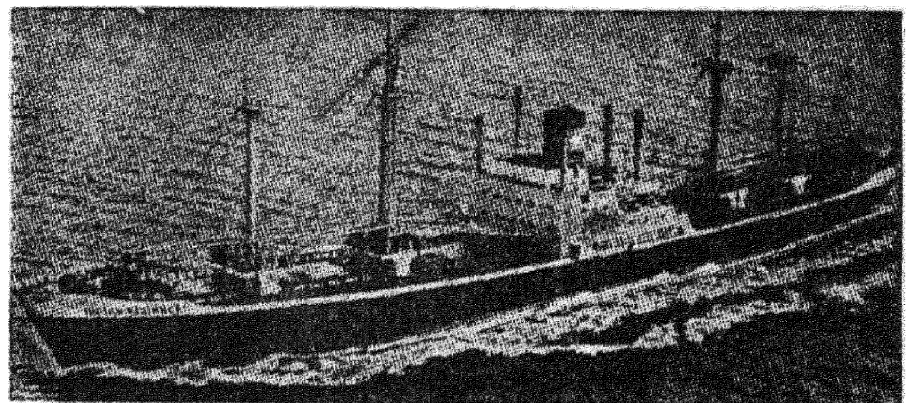
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