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In general, the critics have not been kind to James Bridie. It is true that Eric Bentley was of the opinion that "if Bridie isn't a very great playwright, he is a genuine one," but others have been less flattering. George Jean Nathan, for instance, tells us that "this Bridie . . . seemed to write a play almost every other day . . . judging from the nature of a large number of them, I don't see why he could not toss off twice as many as he did. . . . There is about most of his work an unmediated air and slapdash preparation that give it the sense of a first draft." Even J. B. Priestley, a sympathetic critic, writes of Bridie "trying to cram a large loose mind and a large loose play into the narrow space of our convention."

In the present book Dr. Luyben tries to show that the critics have been undiscerning. The plays, or at least the best of them, far from being slapdash or unmediated, are, she would claim, both well-controlled in form and of considerable intellectual and even philosophical interest. To make her case Dr. Luyben analyses twelve plays, chosen from among more than forty, and covering the whole span of Bridie's career, from *The Switchback* in 1922 through *Tobias and the Angel* (1930) and *Babes in the Wood* (1938) on to his last play *The Baikie Charivari* of 1951. Her analysis leads her to the discovery of a "philosophical continuity" in Bridie's work, traceable through "three stages of moral awareness, which might be labelled 'innocence,' 'disillusionment' and 'resolution.'" Accordingly she wants to call Bridie a moralist, and his plays, in a special sense, morality plays; though she is careful to insist that this morality has little or nothing to do with the more solemn or sententious aspects of Calvinism—Bridie is clown as well as philosopher. The plays make their claim on our attention because they are humorous (this aspect is too little considered in the book) and because they develop an important and rewarding attitude to human problems.

Dr. Luyben's "philosophical continuity" turns out to be what she likes to call "philosophical relativism," which seems to mean simply the statement of both sides of a case without a decision in favour of either. "Inconclusiveness, or ambiguity," she tells us, "is inherent in the structure of a Bridie play because the plays are arguments in which the

balance of thesis and antithesis is maintained and of which the conclusion is never a resolution. They are arguments about, or searches for, truth, and about truth there is no finality." We may think this naive, and certainly Dr. Luyben never examines the grounds for her approval of "inconclusiveness or ambiguity," but at least she is successful in showing that in many instances earlier critics have distorted a play by wholly approving or dismissing a particular argument or character and assuming such a simple opinion was also Bridie's—being, for example, either simply for or against Dr. Knox in *The Anatomist* or for or against Dr. Angelus in the play of that name. Bridie in his best plays, Dr. Luyben is correct in showing, was too humane either to pillory or entirely commend any of the major characters; and she goes some way towards convincing us that he derived such a judicial attitude, and the accompanying technique, from Shaw (about whose plays he wrote criticism) and Ibsen (some of whose plays he adapted).

Dr. Luyben is best when writing about *The Baikie Charivari*, in many ways Bridie's most interesting as well as his last play. Yet even here I find Dr. Luyben's methods and aims too cramped and superficial really to come to terms with what the play has to offer. It is true that she sorts out effectively enough the participants' rival arguments and postures (though she lays too little stress on the play's satiric account of postwar attitudes in Britain), but she never begins to deal with the questions that most dramatic critics would want to see answered. How successful is Bridie's use of fantasy, the culmination of so much earlier but never-so-extended experiment? Does Bridie finally escape, here, the restrictions of the conversation play? Or are the conventions so mixed in this piece that the result is a bizarre amalgam of styles rather than a true and viable theatrical form? How successful is the play's language, with its half-parodies of Eliot, its revue-sketch patter, its rhymed verses, its occasional stiltedness? Do the simplified and formalised character-studies work? Is the humour, lacking the wit and astringency of Shaw, really genial and character-illuminating, or merely facetious and patronising? In a word, is the play any good as theatre? To none of these does Dr. Luyben hazard a reply, so preoccupied is she with "philosophy" and argument.

The weaknesses in the critique of *The Baikie Charivari* stand for the weaknesses of the whole book. It is true that Bridie is little performed, even in Scotland, nowadays, so that we can easily understand why Dr. Luyben is short on theatrical detail. And yet a critic who

chooses to write on a particular dramatist must be capable of visualizing his plays as theatre. It is no good reducing them, as Dr. Luyben consistently does, to skeletons of argument. A successful rebuttal of earlier critics' bad opinions would involve much more theatre-awareness, as well as a much richer and more discriminating critical vocabulary, and a much greater deftness in conducting discussion, than Dr. Luyben's book has to offer.

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