BOOKS *and* OTHER THINGS

By ISABEL PATERSON

A map of the region showing the route followed by André Gide in his "Travels in the Congo" is a useful inset to the book. Without it one would be totally lost among the unfamiliar names, but lost in the company of a man of letters.

Gide is a French critic and novelist to whom the young French writers look as a master and a model. He is also closely observed by certain writers across the Channel. Aldous Huxley has taken a number of useful tips from Gide, especially in "Point Counter Point" (Doubleday, Doran). The note-taking young novelist who is one of the leading figures in Huxley's book is borrowed almost complete from Gide's "The Counterfeiters" (Knopf). Gide's novels have been translated, but have not found any large public in either England or America. He is a novelist's novelist and a critic's critic; he is experimental, tentative and highly technical. He has not much invention, and his characters are cerebral, not instinctive. He is intelligent and much more subtly perverse than Huxley, who seems noisy and gauche by comparison.

Andre Gide a Survivor From the Nineties

Gide is not young. He was born in 1869. Therefore it may be assumed that he has revealed his full capabilities. He began writing in the '90s and was a friend of Oscar Wilde. "Travels in the Congo" (Knopf) is dedicated "to the memory of Joseph Conrad." Gide speaks and reads English.

This African journey would seem to have been undertaken in the right traveler's spirit, of restlessness and disinterested curiosity. He decided to make the trip through the French and Belgian Congo, to Lake Tchad and back, as a New Yorker might decide to go down to Coney Island, for fun. He hoped for an exotic spectacle, of course—tropical fruits and flowers and beasts, dangerous savages perhaps, but all in the nature of a spectacle, an aesthetic enjoyment.

Unfortunately for his peace of mind, he was unable to regard the Congo Negroes as merely the darker shadows of a vivid landscape. He saw them almost immediately as human beings. And their sufferings, the manner in which they are exploited by their white overlords, engaged his sympathies deeply.

The Congo Blacks Are Still Exploited

He was told frequently by resident whites that fair play or ordinary courtesy to the natives was quite wasted. They couldn't appreciate it. Gide entertained doubts. Why should not the blacks prefer to be paid for their labor and goods and to be spoken to as if they were human rather than brutes?

Andre Gide

He tried it, and found they did respond with pathetic gratitude to his honesty. It almost overpowered them. They weren't used to it. They were used to being robbed, starved, driven to work by the lash.

The white "agents" of the European rubber companies which exploit the Congo are the worst in their behavior toward the Negroes. But, as Gide says stingingly in a footnote, if the agents are honest, "it will do them harm. The company will necessarily prefer agents who bring to their coffers more than can be brought in honestly. . . . The agent employs the natives to work at rubber for 25 francs a month, plus 1 franc's worth of rations every Saturday. . . . They are what is called 'volunteer laborers,' who prefer even this lamentable situation to being requisitioned by the administration (for forced labor)."

It is a depressingly old story. Rubber, by the way, is one thing which as yet must be harvested by hand. No machinery has been invented to do the work. And the great cultural handicap of the Negro is that he does not seem to have developed a mechanical facility equal to that of the white races. He may possess it, but, if so, it is still latent. The black, then, is not yet under the "tyranny of the machine," which the young intellectuals of today so deeply deplore. He is primitive and free! As much as he was in the days of Cheops, when he hauled by hand the stone for the Pyramids, urged then as now by the lash of the slave driver.

The Literary Pabulum Of a Modern Writer

A disturbing detail of Gide's notebook—it is just that, jumbled and unsymmetrized, but with many illuminating flashes—is his slightly self-conscious record of the books he read during his leisure moments on the trip.

"I am rereading with rapture all La Fontaine's Fables. I can hardly think of a single quality he does not possess . . . . provided one knows how to look; but the eye that looks must be a skillful one." . . .

"Bossuet's funeral oration on Henrietta of England. . . . I feel the liveliest admiration."

"I have been rereading the first three acts of Molière's 'The Misanthrope.'" . . .

"I am sitting in a large cane armchair watching the shower drench the landscape and then immersing myself again in 'The Master of Ballantrae.'"

Now the disciples of Gide wouldn't be found dead reading Stevenson. Yet their master reads him unashamed; there is scarcely any mention of a "modern" writer in these pages. Well, believe it or not, Marcel Proust got his inspiration from Ruskin. And though Virginia Woolf took her idea of form from Proust, she keys her style to Sterne.

Maybe James Joyce draws his literary sustenance from the Rollo Books.

An official biography of "Leopold of the Belgians" (Century), the royal promoter whose name was a European scandal a generation ago because of his exploitation of the Belgian Congo, has been written by Comte Louis de Lichtervelde and "crowned" in a prize competition judged by Paul Hymans, Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs, and other state functionaries. It is a monument of discretion and avoidance. King Leopold emerges from the whitewash bucket as a positive benefactor of the Congo blacks whom he "rescued from primitive savagery." Leopold's private life is touched upon with even more delicate discretion. It is noteworthy that Leopold frequently "spoke to the country in a language inspired by the noblest idealism."