

NEW NOVELS

BRIAN WESTBY

A change of mood appears in Mr. Forrest Reid's new novel *Brian Westby* (Faber and Faber, 7s. 6d. net). Possibly, of late, it might seem that in his concern for beauty he unfortunately permitted an air of earnest intention to show itself. But here in his latest work that has been blown away and evaporated. This book is clear, humorous, delicate; and it is fresh, as if the author, already with many novels and other books to his credit, were beginning anew, even a little light-heartedly.

On a seaside holiday a middle-aged novelist, Martin Linton, encounters a young man who is trying to write and who wants to become a "famous author"; and they rapidly become friends. The scenes in which the two attempt to collaborate on a story are shrewdly amusing and contain excellent comments on the necessities and devices of good fiction. The charm of these conversations, depending much on verbal play, has few equivalents in present English novels. The graver implications derive from the discovery that the young man, Brian, is the novelist's son. The study of their relationship is subtle and envisaged from both points of view. The beauty of it, to the lonely novelist, is insinuated; and Brian's careless and incomplete attitude is shown as naturally. The events leading up to the revelation to Brian that he is Linton's son are related with a nice deliberation, and a certain suspense accordingly underlies the charming and lighter passages. Antagonism of the mother, from whom there had been a divorce long before, draws the book to a climax, in which Linton's paternal and literary hopes are carried suddenly away. The mother retains exclusive possession of Brian, this from religious scruple, because she considers Linton's novels *heinous*: a reprehensible paganism.

Mr. Reid uses his scenery with an unobvious intrusion as the garments of thought and action—terms, bathing, climbing hills, the interiors of seaside hotel and boarding-house; and his fluid, simple and sometimes lovely prose carries the reader without a jolt. He ranges to and fro in the minds of the father and son, with a continual gentle argumentativeness: "Of course . . . on the other hand . . . but then . . ." an entertaining mental reasoning over the immediate life such as Kafka employed to the highest degree. He, too, has a strain of fantasy expressed in realistic terms, and allegorizes here, perhaps, the inevitable rejection of delicate overfondness which, in the world as it is, contains its own doom. It may result, as in that chapter where Linton stands in the rain looking at his son's lit window—in a glimmer of lamplight being exalted to false splendour.

THE WOMAN WHO HAD IMAGINATION

Mr. H. E. Bates is, to the critically minded reader, a continuously exciting writer, for with all his accomplishment he has not yet ceased to grow. His development, indeed, has never seemed swifter or more certain than within the past year or so, and there are half a dozen tales in *THE WOMAN WHO HAD IMAGINATION, AND OTHER STORIES* (Cape, 7s. 6d. net) which, taken together with "The Fellow Land," or even alone in their own right, suffice to set him in the front rank of living English writers under thirty. Had he staying power? It is hard to be asked, had he penetration? The former can be no longer in doubt, while the latter increases steadily. He remains primarily an objective writer, implying rather than presenting psychological processes; the result leaves us sometimes wondering whether we have quite grasped all that was meant to be implied, but much more seldom prepared to assert that any other method could have been more successful; and where on occasion method and matter meet in a perfect marriage the triumph is absolute. There is one such story here, perhaps the briefest and yet the most memorable. It is "The Gleaner," a study in seven pages of an old woman working in a field alone, all through the late summer day. Not once do we enter her consciousness: simply, we watch her at her work, described in her minute particularity, without a word too few, a word too many. And as we watch, by some unobtrusive magic in the words she becomes not one but universal, not a gleaner but all gleaners and a veritable symbol of humanity itself winning its bread by patient toil from the earth.

There are other stories, only less lovely, which display more plainly Mr. Bates's richly varied talents and, in addition, his technical virtuosity. The change and succession of the moods in the title-story is notably dexterous, the scene shifting from crowded brake in noon sunlight to deserted house shaded against afternoon heat, and then from evening twilight beside the lake to the return under the midnight stars, variety attractive and refreshing in itself but always subtly subordinated to the emotional rise and fall the theme demands. In "The Lily" again—an admirable piece of work—there is the same skill, in the contrasts of sunlight and shadow, the harsh voice and laughter of the old man against the summer silence, in the encounter of the old uncle and his housekeeper, all leading unflatteringly to the final completing touch of the old man's youthful memory. Yet other stories demand mention, "The Waterfall," "Innocence," "A German Idyll" (one of three previously printed in limited editions) and "Time"—the last with its complex

images, of shadow and watch and ancient, of Man defying Time that yet is irrevocable and will destroy him, and yet which he will still defy. And of the rest, be it said, scarcely one is without its individual quality and merit.

14A

14A (Barter, 7s. 6d. net), by Laura Riding and George Eliot, presents a very crowded scene. The principals in a multitude of characters are: Hugh, an Irish poet; Maureen, his wife, whom Hugh leaves at the beginning of the book; Catherine, with whom he goes to live in London; Edith and Eric, a married couple who occupy the flat below Catherine's, in a house which gives the book its title. When Hugh leaves Maureen she follows him to London. When he leaves Catherine and goes back to Maureen Edith and Eric pursue him to Dieppe and elsewhere to plead for his return. He does return to Catherine, but almost at once leaves her again; and this time, somewhat inadvertently, becomes involved with Edith. Catherine tries to commit suicide after his second departure. She recovers from the attempt, drops all the complicated relationships of 14A and changes her mode of life entirely. Maureen divorces Hugh and marries an obtuse but devoted admirer. Hugh becomes a bookseller in New York.

These are the main strands of the story, but many subsidiary strands are woven along with them. Yet in spite of the number of people and the ramifications of their affairs, the threads of the story are twined and unravelled so deftly, the whole narrative is conducted with such briskness and economy, that one is never confused. Each character is neatly epitomized on introduction. All description is in the present tense and the dialogue, of which the book chiefly consists, is set out in play-form. It is very amusing and well-managed dialogue. The authors are chiefly concerned with the surface of things, or with what lies just below the surface: some of the characters—Andy, the disconsolate journalist, for example—are frankly caricatured. Caricature is quite in keeping with the light, detached manner of the book in general. This manner is perfectly appropriate to the affairs of Billy and Janey, or to the multifarious activities of Joho. But here and there in the permutations and combinations of Hugh, Maureen, Edith and Catherine we feel that manner and subject are imperfectly adapted to one another, that the light touch has left too much to implication. The motives which prompt the movements of these people are not evident on the surface, and this is not a story to be burdened with analyses. So it happens that Catherine's attempted suicide—presented retrospectively with little circumstance—has less weight or importance in the story than, say, Dorothy's "Culture" meeting. And Catherine herself, though a singular person and "an influence" among her friends, is vague and undefined beside some of the other characters. But it is only occasionally that one finds it difficult to be either interested or amused: the book remains an adroit and highly entertaining performance.

OIL FOR THE LAMPS OF CHINA

This is, presumably, a first novel, but it displays a width of knowledge and experience and a literary technique that convey no suggestion of the amateur. The story, as such, deals with the critical years in the life of Stephen Chase, an engaging, earnest youngster who is representing a great American oil company in China. The beginning is a little uncertain and unconvincing. Stephen has been for many years in love with Lucy, a vague figure who hardly enters the story and never engages our interest. For reasons that need not be detailed she comes out to Yokohama and then refuses to marry him, whereupon he makes the acquaintance of another young woman, Hester Wentworth, whose father has died on the boat coming out, and marries her at very short notice. This marriage is a success, and the relations of Stephen and Hester maintain a steady thread of human interest throughout the book; but the real subject of *OIL FOR THE LAMPS OF CHINA* (Casell, 7s. 6d. net) is the contrast of American and Chinese mentality as displayed by the organized business methods of the States, trying to sell illuminating oil to the labouring, sometimes starving millions of China.

In the development of that theme, Mrs. Alice Tisdale Hobart displays a real knowledge both of the conditions described and of the kind of organization for which Stephen is working. He is industrious, ambitious and clever. He has, quite early in his service, a brilliant idea for the making of small oil lamps, an idea approved by the company, and successfully launched. Yet he gets small credit for it. We see him, in fact, from first to last, snared by the insistent demand for efficiency. The servants of the company, which they regard as loyal patriots might regard an unreciprocable Government, judges its men by one test only—results. Stephen was not too unlucky. He had the good fortune to come, as near as it was possible for one of his race to come, into friendship with a Chinese of some importance who served him well on more than one occasion. But at the last, after some fifteen years or more of hard work, he is sent back into the interior, now in a state of disastrous revolution, instead of being rewarded with a managership on the coast. We see something of Chinese inhumanity of a revolting type, in the course of the story, but our final impression is rather of the inhumanity of the American business organization.

This summary does little justice to the intimate detail of the book, such as, for in-