

ing of lurid stories of sex and crime. One or two of the newspapers loudest in their condemnation of 'pornography' have often committed them without a qualm.

IAIN HAMILTON

## NEW NOVELS

### Unholy Mackerel

**The Mackerel Plaza.** By Peter de Vries. (Gollancz, 15s.)

**Taking it Easy.** By Edward Hyams. (Longmans, 16s.)

**The Darling Buds of May.** By H. E. Bates. (Michael Joseph, 12s. 6d.)

**The Darling of her Heart and Other Stories.** By Rhys Davies. (Heinemann, 15s.)

THE hero of the new Peter de Vries novel, *The Mackerel Plaza*, is the preacher at People's Liberal, an exurban church which has accommodated itself with considerable pliancy to the needs of this day and age. It is the first split-level church building in America. It has an adjoining neuropsychiatric clinic. And it has a small 'worship area' where a mobile revolves 'in perpetual reminder of the Pauline stricture against those "blown by every wind of doctrine,"' and the Reverend Mackerel directs his ten-minute sermons to minds 'come of age in the era of Relativity.' When we first meet Mackerel he is complaining to the Zoning Board about a hoarding in the neighbourhood which bears the offensive slogan 'Jesus Saves.'

Mackerel, in spite of his vocation, is easily recognised as a variant on the prototype de Vries hero. Asked whether he likes cod-fish balls, he will reply, true to form, that he has never attended any. He takes a special and secret pleasure in the solecisms and malapropisms that the women about him invariably trot out. He is a joker, an aphorist, a parodist; and it is his inability to resist the beckoning innuendo that he sees looming up in a sermon that eventually, though temporarily, costs him his living. All this will be familiar to de Vries readers, but there is one new and less welcome element. For once you have to take the plot seriously, and it isn't up to that. Mackerel, a widower, discovers to his annoyance that just when he wants, and has the chance, to remarry, his parishioners are determined to keep his wife's memory alive. Building a new town centre, the Mackerel Plaza, is one of the projects by which they mean to do it. And since Ida May Mackerel died in extremely nasty circumstances, all the genuine comedy that comes out of the complications does not succeed in hiding the fact that there is an underlying tastelessness in the book. In de Vries the comedy depends altogether on the amiability of the hero. He is the narrator, a projection of the author. If you lose sympathy with him, you lose sympathy with everything.

Edward Hyams's *Taking it Easy*, a novel about what to make out of life, traces the careers of two men who were thrown together in the services: Tom, ex-editor of a horticultural magazine, and Ray Martin, his commanding officer in a fictitious special branch of the Navy. While Martin, who must always be on the make, takes over Tom's wife, and with what he earns by selling a secret radar appliance to a French firm, sets up a PR company, Tom takes it easy. He settles for a job managing a market garden and a part share in the attentions of a sluttish married mistress. It is not until Martin fails that Tom, who has come into some money more by chance than contrivance, realises that although Martin's methods had been bad his own policy had not been much better, that to be happy you had to take a chance on other people's affection and accept responsibility. There's not much to quarrel with in that, but there is in the way the story gets off the subject

and on to horticulture, little-magazine society, aeroplanes, food, wine and foreign parts. On none of these topics does the author display the least ignorance, or the least suspicion that they are not important to the theme.

*The Darling Buds of May*, the latest H. E. Bates, is not so much a story as a wistful day-dream about innocence and happiness. It concerns the tax-evading, guzzling, rollicking, generous Larkins, who run a Rolls, keep two tellys, cook three geese for their Sunday dinner, and have in constant use an enormous chrome-and-glass cocktail cabinet in the shape of a Spanish galleon. And all that, apparently, on what the old man earns as a small farmer and the six children by picking strawberries and cherries. To their cottage one sunny day in May comes a young income-tax inspector who, overwhelmed by the opulence of their hospitality and the concupiscence of their eldest daughter, throws up his job and becomes one of the family. It is hard to tell just what Mr. Bates is up to. If it's just an escapist fantasy, it relies too much on its charm. If it's meant to convey that we could all do with a bit more of what the Larkins have too much of, well, maybe; but hasn't the case been overstated just a little?

Rhys Davies is one of the best writers on Wales, for he knows exactly where the bounds of real national difference lie, and avoids like the plague the dangerous hinterland where the valleys—and the corn—are green. Seven of the nine stories in *The Darling of her Heart* are set in Wales; sharp and ironic, sparsely written for all their emotional weight.

GEOFFREY NICHOLSON

## COMPANY MEETING

### MILLARS' TIMBER & TRADING

#### TURNOVER MAINTAINED

THE annual general meeting of Millars' Timber & Trading Company, Ltd., was held on July 16 in London, Mr. C. T. Pott presiding.

The following is an extract from the Directors' Statement circulated with the report and accounts for the year to December 31, 1957:

Results for 1957 have not been as good as those for 1956. The Group trading surplus fell from £419,214 to £365,290, but it is gratifying to note that our turnover was maintained at about the same record figure as for 1956. After allowing for taxation and adequate depreciation, the net profit of the Group for 1957 amounted to £112,653. The dividends paid or recommended include a 12 per cent dividend on the company's Ordinary Capital. Current assets exceeded current liabilities by £1,607,467 at the end of 1957.

Our general trade in Australia continued at a low level. During the year a great deal of re-organisation of our business in Australia has taken place, and we are able to report that, for the first time for very many years, cost of production did not show any increase—in fact it showed a small reduction.

The export trade in Jarrah and Karri was well maintained in volume but severe competition kept profit margins very small in spite of the large reduction in tramp freight rates.

David Roberts, Son & Co. (Bootle) Ltd., who are pre-eminent in the sale of Greenheart in this country and who also deal in other hardwoods and softwoods, maintained their turnover and had a satisfactory year. Our Belgian Company increased their turnover and, in spite of smaller margins, made reasonable profits.

Millars' Machinery Co. Ltd. had a reasonably successful year but the Credit Squeeze and partial cessation of building in this country had an adverse effect on turnover and profit margins.

With regard to the outlook, there are some bright spots but, taking the Group's activities as a whole, it is thought that the results for 1958 may be about the same as those for 1957.

The report was adopted.