

academic term) more intent on being 'sound' than on being intelligent; and they often eschew critical insight and style in favour of a massive documentation, among the footnotes of which the subject plays dreary games of hide-and-seek with the reader. Mr. Allen's book is not entirely free of these defects, but after the first hundred pages they are not obtrusive. Whitman's early background and education provide biographers with a difficulty similar to that confronting Shakespeare's biographers. In chapter one or two we see the boy holding horses in front of the theatre and a few chapters later he is writing *Lear*, and it is difficult to see how he managed it. Whitman isn't Shakespeare, but 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' is the greatest American poem of the nineteenth century, and 'Song of Myself' shows a sense of time and history rare enough to make us wonder how Whitman picked it up wandering through Dr. Abbott's Egyptian Museum on Broadway, or clipping 'One Thousand Historical Events, with the Dates,' out of an encyclopaedia. In these pages Mr. Allen's tremendous accumulations of unimportant facts only get in the way of a clear picture. But he is better when he comes to the poetry.

Despite an air of critical relaxation, the treatment of the poetry is the best part of the book. Mr. Allen demonstrates a convincing relation between the form of Whitman's best poems and the nature of the mind and sensibility behind them. His discussion of 'Song of Myself' is especially good. What usually appears to be a sprawling sequence of fifty-two loosely connected poems he shows to be a closely integrated and unitary work, rooted deeply in Whitman's total experience, possessing form in a high degree. And so on with all the great central poems. He is not alone in this approach. During the past few years a great deal of work has been done to show that, as a poet, Whitman was a Kosmos after all. He had seemed one of the poets least amenable to the techniques of modern criticism. Oddly, he may end by profiting from them more than most. At any rate, the 'barbaric yawp' has begun to fade to finer music, and Mr. Allen's biography assists the transition.

MARIUS BEWLEY

### New Hands and Old

- Lucia Wilmot. By Mary K. Harris. (Chatto and Windus, 15s.)
- An Affair with the Moon. By Terence de Vere White. (Gollancz, 15s.)
- Flowers from the Enemy. By Gordon Rowbottom. (Secker and Warburg, 13s. 6d.)
- A Breath of French Air. By H. E. Bates. (Michael Joseph, 12s. 6d.)

MISS HARRIS is a lively writer who hasn't quite found her style yet. In the present novel she at times approaches Miss Compton-Burnett—which seems perverse, seeing that her own gifts lie in so different a direction—but Miss Compton-Burnett would never commit such improprieties as 'it would neither have added nor detracted from her look of confident supremacy' or 'if Mrs. Wilmot had little aesthetic appreciation for material things, neither had Lucia.' Never mind, Miss Harris has a vigorous way with words; she puts them to work. An exasperated nun 'tore Lucia's name in half as if it were an infuriating piece of rag.' 'Loo-cia Wilmot!'" And 'tennis balls shook the high netting like crazed animals in a zoo.' The female characters are hit off splendidly, but they don't do much. It is not the tale of Lucia Wilmot that counts, but the manner of the telling. And now that young Lucia has got started, there will

surely be more to tell. It doesn't sound very generous to credit the author with the beginnings of a strong and individual style perhaps, but of how many established contemporary novelists could one say even that?

*An Affair with the Moon* ('in which there was neither sin nor shame,' Laurence Sterne) is an odd mixture of sophistication and sentimentality. Jane is a beguiling, somewhat loose—at any rate Anita Loos—poppet, whereas the love-making is rather sweetly conveyed in old-world imagery of torrents and rapids and whirlpools. Some good venial rascals, such as the 'business gentlemen' Thistle and Litmus, are introduced; and even the present reviewer (spiritually incapacitated by an early misadventure with a donkey in Upper Egypt) fell for the horsey Irish stuff. The trouble is that the hero, who otherwise deserves that appellation for marrying Jane, is a poorer fish than his creator intends him to be, and all Jane's charm and charms fail to compensate for a dimness of intelligence remarkable even in that species of poppet. Further damage results from the fact that she isn't the moon, after all, and sin and shame creep in despite the author's gallant efforts in the cause of light-hearted amorality. The blurb describes Jane as 'a *Green Hat* heroine, and desperately serious after her fashion.' Well, that still-birth on the last page does sober her up a little. . . . No, the sophistication and the sentimentality are not mixed in the classic proportions patented by Michael Arlen. But the book is well written and makes entertaining reading.

*Flowers from the Enemy* tells the harrowing story of Anne, who joined the French section of the SOE 'in a fit of despondency' following a miscarriage, was captured and sent to Dachau, lost her memory, and is discovered twelve years afterwards working as a hostess in a Paris cabaret. She was the wife of Julius, but now takes more readily

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to Gerald, her childhood sweetheart, who escorts her on a tour of her past, including Dachau ('It's brutal, of course, but there it is. Somehow we've got to get the mechanism ticking'). Little by little she remembers things—but not that Gerald is impotent, which is why they didn't marry in the first case. Rather than remind her of this, Gerald puts her to sleep with phenol. The author realises that this is a drastic solution—'People have asked me why . . . '—but he doesn't manage to justify it. A woman who has survived so much would certainly survive a good deal more. Gerald argues at length that one man will patch up a run-over dog and see it live a cripple for the rest of its life, while another will put it instantly out of its misery, and how can we tell which is right, since the dog cannot be consulted? No doubt at Dachau the better-mannered of them argued along similar lines—you'll be far better off dead.

These three writers have this in common: they take the novel seriously, they are making a serious effort to write a novel. *An Affair with the Moon* and *Flowers from the Enemy* are first novels; *Lucia Wilmot* is a second novel. *A Breath of French Air*, however, is the sort of professional job which one admires in spite of oneself; it is as 'eminently readable' as one would expect of a highly experienced raconteur playing simple variations on three or four basic jokes. I started it after breakfast, and the loving descriptions of Ma Larkin, her breast 'twice as large as a full-ripe melon,' engaged in feeding little Oscar (glug, glug! plop!) nearly brought my cornflakes back. The book is chock-a-block with belly, breast and buttock. All very racy, earthy, Rabelaisian and so forth. If you were allowed to take one book to a desert island where there was no food, no drink and no women, this would be the perfect book to take. It would soon put you out of your misery.

D. J. ENRIGHT