

NEW NOVELS

A Walk in the Sun. By HARRY BROWN.
Secker and Warburg. 6s.

Fair Stood the Wind for France. By H. E.
BATES. *Michael Joseph.* 9s. 6d.

Men Die Alone. By MICHAEL LEIGH. *Eyre and Spottiswoode.* 7s. 6d.

Like aspects of the war itself, novels about the war can produce in the reader a great variety of feelings. Whether the material is taken from the battle-fronts, as in these three novels, or from the dreary corruption of the wartime Civil Service, as in Mr. Balchin's *The Small Back Room*, the treatment has only to be moderately competent to induce all the feelings one has about mere news: rage, impotence, pity, wretchedness and, above all perhaps, a guiltiness at being well, happy or even alive, which one tries one's hardest to evade. But if this is all we get from a novel, certain things are lacking which ought to be there: among them the preservative qualities of art without which no novel, play or poem will survive much longer than news survives. *Journey's End*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Death of a Hero*, *All Our Yesterdays* were intensely sincere works, factually substantial and written by writers who even, in a dilettante way, had an interest in the technique of their arts. To the young reader of to-day they will scarcely be more than names. Two of the three novels listed above will, one predicts, suffer the same fate, though they are written with a passionate belief in their subject-matter and with an obvious care for truth. But though they do not lack care, and though they have their moving moments and exciting final runs towards their climaxes, they induce only the emotions that news induces. At their high spots they make one's heart beat faster; but they will not do so twice.

In *A Walk in the Sun*, Mr. Harry Brown makes the heart hop in a different way—as, for example, a change from the major to the minor may in a piece of music. He seems deliberately to avoid the ready-made advantages of his material. There are deaths and wounds in his book, but they do not awake horror, nor are they meant to. His plot, or the cadence of his story, is indicated as soon as it reasonably can be. We soon know where the story is going and where it will end; the author therefore sets himself the problem of interesting us primarily in the way he gets through with it. There is no sentimentality, no propaganda, no melodrama; one does not feel ashamed because the characters are on a blister-

ing road in an Italian beach-head and oneself is in an armchair. Mr. Brown's kind of realism is a curious one. It comes from the air of calm, unquestioned and unquestionable inevitability which hangs about the book; he makes us not so much feel that we are there on the spot as acknowledge how we should be bound to feel if we were: a less spectacular, but a harder, task than that of the war-thriller. He knows an extraordinary amount—all, one is tempted to say—about the possible norms of feeling in continually abnormal circumstances.

His book is simply the story of a platoon's first exploit in Italy. It begins in the landing-bergs in the dark and it carries the platoon six miles inland to the capture of its scheduled objective, a small farmhouse. Its first remarkable achievement is to make us feel, quite early in the book, the haphazard nature of death; we become as much reconciled to this as are the characters themselves—they have become used to it in a year's fighting through North Africa and Sicily. We feel not only the chancy incidence of death, but the quick readjustment of balance and attitude that must happen in a small group of soldiers every time someone is subtracted from them. The leading officer is killed in the first few pages, and one knows that a potential plot has been thereby reshuffled. Twenty pages later the leading sergeant is wounded and another reshuffle takes place. The leading sergeant after him eventually collapses into hysteria; the potential future changes again. One is even conscious—as the men would be—that if their original commanding officer had not been knocked out in Sicily before the book begins, the situation would have been still otherwise. There is a continual sense of modulation in the book; I imagine this to be wholly true to life, and Mr. Brown is wholly convincing in his representation of it.

In this book one has more than the jolted excitement one has at a film; one has the excitement given by the progress and fulfilment of a work of art. Mr. Brown has deliberately chosen a side alley of the Anzio story: it best satisfies his requirements. He writes his tale in understatement, yet with the aplomb, the *savoir-faire*, the sense of proportion of a classical sonata. The whole book is beautifully composed; it is witty—almost the whole of the dialogue is banter and wise-cracks; it has none of the sentimental toughness of much American writing; its style is nearer to Thurber than to Hemingway, a style chastened and subdued, capable not only of describing action but of conveying knowledge.

War, without virtue in itself, breeds virtue. It breeds patience in the impatient and heroism in the cowardly, but mostly it breeds patience. For war is a dull business, the dulllest business on earth. War is a period of waiting. Mainly in a period of waiting for war to be over, but each day it is crammed with the little hesitations of the men uncertain of themselves and awed by the ghastly responsibilities, responsibilities of life and death, the responsibilities of gods, that have been thrust into their hands. The soldier waits for food, for clothing, for a letter, for a battle to begin. And often the food never is served, the clothing is never issued, the letter never arrives and the battle never begins. The soldier learns to wait meekly, hoping that something will happen. And, when the period of waiting is at an end, the something that does happen isn't what he expected. So in the end he learns to wait and expect nothing. That is patience. That is God's one great gift to the soldier.

Though they are efficiently executed, *Fair Stood the Wind for France* and *Men Die Alone* are novels on a much lower level. Mr. Bates's novel is the story of an airman forced to land in Occupied France while flying back from an attack on Italy. He is looked after by a French family, and he and the daughter of the house fall in love. The second half of the book records their escape to Spain. The background of the war and the ever-present, overpowering threat of danger seem to me to take the place of characterisation in such novels as this. The man and the girl think a good deal, and we overhear their thoughts, but there is no conflict or development, only the efforts to cope with external situations. It is only when these are particularly unusual that the book comes to life, and that it ceases to matter that the characters are conventional and doll-like and that the book is flat and dead in tone. The first half of the book is rather slow going, but in its latter pages it becomes very thrilling: the scenes in the inn at the Vichy border, in the hideously demoralised "bad town" in the south, and in Martignes, are told with excellent craftsmanship.

Men Die Alone is about an isolated few soldiers on the South Russian front who, together with a nurse, become detached from the main forces and are left to creep and fight their way through a country occupied by the Germans back to their own lines. The incidents are well chosen and well timed, and, since the author is not a Russian, the book is a *tour-de-force* of imaginative projection. The discovery of the butchered and deserted village in the snow is terrible and impressive, and the turning-point of the story—which is identified with the turning-point of the

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Russian war—is extremely moving. One lives for a time through that great moment when to so many similarly `isolated groups the knowledge came that the Germans had broken, Stalingrad had been relieved and the recapture of the great names had begun. The story is rather naively told, the characters are operatically simplified—Djerjinsky is probably already at work with some such libretto as this before him—but the book is worth reading, and it jogs the worn-out memory at an appropriate spot.

HENRY REED