

## SOAP-OPERA ESCAPISM

STUART MITCHEL: *Clerks in Lowly Orders*, 200pp, Gollancz, 13s. 6d.  
H. E. BATES: *The Darling Buds of May*, 158pp, Michael Joseph, 12s. 6d.  
KENNETH ALLSOP: *Rare Bird*, 223pp, Jarrolds, 12s. 6d.  
OWEN GUINNESS: *Doctor Tonrondo*, 352pp, Chapman and Hall, 16s.

The perennial popularity of the Dales and the Archers, not to mention the Groves, suggests that a close reproduction of the humdrum daily round has an entertainment value all its own. In fact, of course, soap-opera is skillfully edited to seem humdrum, whereas mere tape-recording would be tedious. Mr. Mitchel has tackled this problem at its toughest, by devoting his entire first novel to the minutiae of a day and a half in a Civil Service office. Tea appears, momentary tensions arise about the opening of windows, lending of pencils, and all that makes office routine so stultifying to the many thousands who clock-watch it through year by year. *Clerks in Lowly Orders* is more subtle than it sounds, less so than Mr. Mitchel imagines. Beneath the good-natured irritations of a sub-department in the Ministry of Technology and Automation sinister forces are at work: Lupton, who has an ex-Communist girl friend, and once sold the *Daily Worker*, is precipitously purged, but his departure causes a smaller ripple than the temporary loss of a file or the dismissal of Miss Rény-Ott, who has failed her executive examination fifteen times and has one too many drinks after a meeting on equal pay. The inhumanity of it all, which Mr. Mitchel points by stray echoes of Kafka, would be more moving if our sympathies were not dispersed among too many characters, each more drably mediocre than the last. The style, and certain scenes outside the office, show that Mr. Mitchel has considerable talent, however, and owes himself next time a more pre-possessing subject.

Mr. Bates, by contrast, has tossed off a novel so unambitious, so certain to please before he begins, that one cannot help feeling it is a little smug. Unlike Uncle Silas, the Larkin family are not rosy-checked rustics but country spivs who might in harder times or climes be called "deprived." Not a bit of it—they have two television sets, gobble a couple of geese for Sunday dinner, lend their field for the village gymkhana—all by dint of casual fruit-picking and tax evasion. Unabashed by the solemn pasty-faced young man who calls with his yellow forms, Pop welcomes the chance of a "perfect" husband for Mariette, eldest of the Larkin brood, who is inconveniently expecting a baby. Pop's cocktails, Ma's gargantuan

meals and Mariette's willing curves make short work of poor Cedric's conscience and the reader's scruples, and everyone settles back to further gastronomic excesses under the sunny blossom and Mr. Bates's lulling benevolent eye. If he intends a moral, it is that we should forget our inhibited and bomb-conscious fears, at least while we read *The Darling Buds of May*, but even if "mankind cannot bear very much reality," still less can it stomach much more of this kind of sugary escapism.

In *Rare Bird* Mr. Allsop has tried to combine the same sort of happy retreat from serious matters with some hard-hitting satire on the manners of his Fleet Street colleagues. Ornithologists may appreciate the dull and peering Philip, who discovers some black-winged stilts nesting in a Wiltshire marsh; others will skip to where he has to battle with an army of reporters, mannish lady columnists, and pompous officials of SCAB, who are determined to take charge of this scientific treasure. Ragnarall Magnus quickly become Bedlam, with trippers, helicopters, Italian film stars, and angry villagers squirting soda syphons, capsizing tennis, floundering in the mud, and generally making us roll in the aisles.

Mr. Allsop at least is satisfied when his farce allows the precious birds to return undisturbed to their rural home.

*Doctor Tonrondo* is an oddity; not, as a cursory glance at pages peppered with unpronounceable Celtic suggests, a straightforward Welsh tale about the farmer's son who plunged mistakenly into the corrupt English world of towns, doctoring, and ambitious women, but a mixture of naive misogyny and tender Chaplinesque fantasy which nevertheless seems as fashionably "uncommitted" as Mr. Amis's picture of the Welsh at home. Johnny is too good for the world, an innocent who is most happy with his fishing line on the hills, but whom a tough Chapel father, a dull medical career, and a frigid monster of a wife do their best to drive insane. He is a gentle sensualist too, and Mr. Guinness wisely allows laughter to increase our liking for a hero who risks being merely pathetic. This is by no means everybody's novel, but the irony of style and Mr. Guinness's own flights of Celtic fancy lend it a charm quite out of the ordinary.