

NEW FICTION

- MARY K. HARRIS: *Lucia Wilmot*. 316pp. Chatto and Windus. 15s.
 TERENCE DE VERE WHITE: *An Affair with the Moon*. 240pp. Gollancz. 15s.
 H. E. BATES: *A Breath of French Air*. 159pp. Michael Joseph. 12s. 6d.
 JOHN PREBBLE: *The Buffalo Soldiers*. 233pp. Secker and Warburg. 15s.

Miss Mary K. Harris's title *Lucia Wilmot*, proclaims the purpose of her novel: to draw a portrait of a girl, that is, a girl at the age of adolescence, although this, of course, cannot be deduced from the mere announcement of her name. Girls generally do not receive the same sort of full-length treatment from novelists as, for instance, Sir Compton Mackenzie gave to Michael Fane or Maurice Baring to "C," although there is always Becky Sharp at the time she set out to challenge the world.

There are, as it happens, affinities between Lucia and Becky, the most important being their will power and their determination to be positive, to take control; but, while Becky schemes for selfish ends, Lucia is passionate in her idealism. The dominant quality in Lucia is vitality, and she possesses in full measure that impatience with illness, or any similar weakness in others, which often goes with it. The irony of the situation is that Lucia herself is ill—she is a consumptive—and is in reality protected by the sick, nervous Martin who had meant to become a Lutheran minister and whose family has suffered in Nazi Germany (the period is 1938), things that Lucia, with her brash self-confidence, cannot begin to imagine. Lucia's cure for poor Martin's nervousness is to force him to go back to Germany with her at the time of the Munich crisis, and it is the foiling of this plan by positive, self-sacrificing action on Martin's part that provides the novel with its climax.

Lucia dominates the novel, but her mother, a philanthropist who deals in causes rather than people, a formidable personality, yet one by no means without perception or human sympathy, bulks large in it. Miss Harris evokes satisfactorily enough the atmosphere of middle-class suburbia 20 years ago; but her real triumph lies in the fact that she makes Lucia's vitality electrical enough to threaten the covers that contain it—here indeed is a hurry in the veins of youth that makes a vice of virtue by excess.

Mr. Terence de Vere White's Jane in *An Affair with the Moon* ("I had an affair with the moon," wrote Laurence Sterne, "in which there was neither sin nor shame") is, to put it vulgarly, a filly of a very different colour. Jane carries amorality to the point of genius, but there is no particular credit in the feat since she was born without any moral sense worth speaking about. She is, however, beautiful; she is generous; she is innocent of self-seeking and many other of the convenient social deceptions, and her mental age is that of a radiant twelve.

Her husband for the moment—the "I" of the narrative—a stolid Yorkshire

solicitor, is, in marrying her, as much out of his element as though he were in truth on the moon, but he is no fool and he is quick in perceiving that, in meeting Jane, he has not "encountered Diana of the Crossways or Rhoda Fleming, the dialogue was much closer, perilously close to Anita Loos." The scene shifts to Eire and Mr. White, who has a shaky sense of construction, introduces, for no discernible purpose, a number of more or less comic Irish types and spends pages on a detailed account of a *farouche* day's hunting. The novel's description of itself as one of "rich comedy with a dying fall" will pass, but a little of Jane in real life would be quite enough and in fiction, as Mr. White would seem to feel, it is hard work making a book of her.

Just as "Pop" Larkin knew he was on to a good thing when he started buying and selling for ready cash, enjoying himself within the ample bosom of his family and letting the rest of the world, including the income-tax authorities, go by, so would Mr. H. E. Bates seem to know that he is on to a good thing in "Pop" Larkin. In *A Breath of French Air* the family crosses to France for a holiday, and Mr. Bates continues his self-consciously earthy prose-poem in praise of the Larkins' grossness of appetite in all that concerns food, drink and sex. There is a hint of deeper significances—Mlle. Dupont, the owner of the boarding-house where the Larkins stay, is convinced that "Pop" is an English *milord*, and can it be that he, with his sensual feeling for life, his ignorance and his superb indifference to the conventions, is meant to be the new type of aristocrat—new in some respects, that is, and, in others, a throw-back to the old?

Mr. John Prebble's *The Buffalo Soldiers*, "a novel of the West," cries out to be made into a film and probably will be. The period, a favourite in the cinema, is immediately after the Civil War, and the somewhat guilty feeling which films show to-day on the question of Indians is here complicated by the fact that the particular troop of United States cavalry commanded by Lieutenant Byrne with which the story is concerned consists of Negroes. White, black and red—the colour scheme is complex, but Mr. Prebble keeps his story of the patrol's pursuit into the "Bad Lands" of a group of Comanches it had started out by protecting within the simple, classic lines of Western narrative. Byrne, however, who likes to think things out, is not altogether a simple character, and in that he is, so far as Western heroes are concerned, in the fashion.