

New Fiction

- ELISE SANGUINETTI: *The Last of the Whitfields*. 279pp. Chatto and Windus. 18s.
SCOTT SULLIVAN: *The Shortest Gladdest Years*. 381pp. Cassell. 21s.
H. E. BATES: *Oh! To Be in England*. 167pp. Michael Joseph. 15s.
J. LOGAN GOURLAY: *A Ticket for the Peepshow*. 224pp. Hutchinson. 18s.
PAUL BRODEUR: *The Sick Fox*. 305pp. Gollancz. 21s.

The small-town childhood has a much loved place in American mythology and in American letters. Mrs. Sanguinetti's *The Last of the Whitfields* belongs, perhaps rather consciously, to this literary tradition, and is no less agreeable for that. Thirteen-year-old Felicia Whitfield tells the story. Her father is a banker, and her brother, Arthur, has just reached the awkward age. They live in Georgia, surrounded by the pride and grace and troubled self-consciousness of the South; but Felicia thinks politics and the endless talk about coloured people are boring. She simply describes the events of the past year; how Arthur was sent away to school in Connecticut, and the transformations he underwent; how a northern journalist came to visit, and the awful lies she told him; how she graduated from grammar school, and grew tragically tall, and went to her first dance. Felicia is a shrewd young person. Her narrative style and Arthur's letters home are beautifully conceived. The effect is often extremely funny; but the lasting impression is one of gentleness and affection, of a South very different from the picture which the world has lately been shown.

Mrs. Sanguinetti's characters are good people: Mr. Scott Sullivan's, in *The Shortest Gladdest Years*, are made of depressingly poor stuff. They are undergraduates at an Ivy League university: Kevin, who comes from a respectable middle-class family but gets sent down without a degree; Harry, a rebellious Jew from the Bronx; Anson, who is rich and amiable and idle; and Martin, who is ruthlessly ambitious. They share a set of rooms, and each becomes narrator for one of their four student years. Martin works on the university paper. They all do a lot of womanizing and drinking. For British readers there is some interest in observing the similarities and the differences between Ivy League life and life at Oxford or Cambridge.

Not to every writer is it given to create a living, breathing quotable character, cast large in the heroic mould. When he imagined Pop Larkin, Mr. H. E. Bates undeniably worked that miracle. Born of

high Falstaffian lineage, Pop is a creature of robust appetites and generous heart. Having defeated the Inland Revenue, this king of junk-dealers lives in chaotic affluence. He eats and drinks his fill: he drives a Rolls-Royce; he resides with Ma Larkin (whom he never bothered to marry) and a vast brood of children (whom he never bothered to christen) on his "perfect paradise" in Kent, loving England and the countryside, and trying "to find some good in everybody, even the worst of stinkers". Mr. Bates seems now to feel that the single act of creation was enough. *Oh! To Be in England* has a tenuous comic plot about an encounter with teddy-boys and the christening ("John Marlborough Churchill Blenheim") of a Larkin grandson: but it is really little, more than an improvised vehicle from which Pop Larkin can steal another quick bow.

Mr. Logan Gourlay's *A Ticket for the Peepshow* is also slight and episodic, but less wholesome; its flavour is sweet-and-sour. Himself a veteran show-business reporter for the popular press, Mr. Gourlay uses such a journalist as observer or chorus, passing him through a series of incidents in London, Hollywood, Rome, and Monte Carlo, where a shifting group of film people perform unedifying convolutions. Mr. Gourlay knows this sort of world and these kinds of people: he has drawn on his own experience, notably for a grimly accurate, though quite irrelevant, scene in Cuba. But what is there beneath the slickness? Nothing to rest on, no point of calm.

The Sick Fox, on the other hand, is clearly meant to be significant. The difficulty is to discover just what Mr. Paul Brodeur intends it to signify. On the surface it seems a well-told but unexciting story about an American intelligence officer responsible for a rocket site in a remote corner of Germany. After accidentally starting a rabies scare, he is driven to defend a surly nomadic shepherd against the hostility of the villagers. Mr. Brodeur is probably saying something about the value of aloofness and independence in a world where conventional communities have gone mad with fear and suspicion: but the exact application of the parable, if it is one, remains obscure.