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The Listener's Book Chronicle

Betsy Sheridan's Journal

Edited by William Le Fanu.

Eyre and Spottiswoode. 30s.

Reviewed by WILLIAM PLOMER

IN THE SEVENTEEN-EIGHTIES Sheridan's younger sister, living in England, wrote this journal in the form of letters to her elder, married sister in Dublin. Her life with her father was not all roses. He was a retired and declining actor, self-important, quarrelsome and disgruntled. After his death she lived under the roof of Richard Brinsley Sheridan and his wife. Both were good to her. Owing to their kindness and the brilliant man's important political position, Betsy was enabled to mingle to some extent with smart, grand people. These made her conscious of her own dependent position and unflashy endowments. At the same time she was troubled by the odious behaviour of her other brother towards her and by possible threats to her happiness with her future husband, the amiable Henry Le Fanu.

Personal preoccupations and family squabbles do nothing to spoil her letters, the spontaneous jottings of a lively and likeable young woman caught up for a few years with the fashionable world in London and at Tunbridge Wells and Bath. 'With regard to my own affairs', she writes in 1789, 'I will say as little as possible... The life of uniform vexation and disappointment I have led for years has indeed been hitherto a painful one perpetually kept between dependence and unkindness'.

But her manners are too good to limit her letters to bellyaching; her natural grace and sprightliness prevail. A note on fashion: 'You may tell her as a friend gradually to reduce her Stuffing as Rumps are quite out in France and are decreasing here but cannot be quite given up till the weather grows warmer'. A front seat at the trial of Warren Hastings affords impressions of Burke, whose 'flow of language and force of imagination' prevailed over his displeasing manner; of Fox, whose manner was more taking than his voice; and, more emotionally, of 'Our Brother', dignified, animated, distinct. Her head was not turned by an 'enquiring stare' from the Prince of Wales at a grand supper in fancy dress: 'I have had a peep at the Raree Show of the great world without trouble or risk, and not being young enough to have my brain turn'd shall enjoy my broil'd bone in Cuffe Street with as much pleasure as ever'.

Modest, quick, unambitious, Betsy deserved that her letters (which were read by Tom Moore for his *Life of Sheridan*) should at last be printed and deftly edited by a great-great-grandnephew.

The Battle of Britain. By Edward Bishop.

Allen and Unwin. 21s.

brought up in the complex and sinister climate of nuclear physics it is already becoming 'an issue of dwindling emotional proportions'. Nevertheless it remains a unique and mighty date in our history: a battle the like of which was never waged before and, as surely as Crecy and Agincourt, will never be waged again. Like Trafalgar, it was not merely a great victory in itself; it was the torch that was to light, years afterwards, the ultimate conflagration—a great means to a greater end. Other great battles, the Mindens, the Quiberons and the rest, may be commemorated with the right parochial pride in parades, squares and places apart, but the Battle of Britain alone shares, with Trafalgar, the high honour of being accorded its own national day of commemoration.

Dwindling emotional proportions or not, it is certain that none of us who watched the battle being fought in the skies of southern England between July and the end of September 1940 will ever forget it. Its uniqueness lies not merely in the fact that it was a mortal struggle for the survival of these islands; it was also the first great armed conflict ever to be fought here in full blazing view of the civilian population. For the first time in our history a housewife carrying her shopping basket could pause, look up into the sky and watch armed men engaged in the bloody business of exterminating each other; a farm labourer at harvest could, for the first time also, look up and see the victims of battle dropping into his barley. Above all, although older heads may have directed the many battles behind it, it was very much an affair of youth. It will always belong, indeed, to the young: the immortal few.

It is pertinent to recall, as Mr. Bishop in fact does, the high importance of some of those other battles, not the least significant of which was that waged by Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding to prevent the frail and diminishing resources of Fighter Command being squandered in the Battle of France. It still strikes a chill into the heart to be reminded that, between May 8 and May 18 1940, Fighter Command lost no fewer than 250 Hurricanes in France (Spitfires were too precious to send), or two in every hour of daylight. It is recorded that the army, at the evacuation of Dunkirk, was much embittered at the R.A.F.'s absence from that momentous occasion; but the stark fact remains that without Dowding's decision to withdraw his fighters from France and husband his final resources—about a fortnight's supply at the current rate of losses—there would have been no other battles left to fight. The same is true of Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfred Truman and Lord Beaverbrook, who waged their own battles before and behind the scenes.

Though by no means matching the epic theme with epic quality—the whole affair needs the Churchill touch—Mr. Bishop's book has both urgency and spirit. In spite of what has clearly been much assiduous research, it never gets

No doubt the future will give us better books about those eleven electric weeks of that immortal summer in southern England in 1940, but meanwhile anyone in danger of supposing the affair to be 'an issue of dwindling emotional proportions' could do much worse than refresh his memory with this one. It will also do no harm to anyone, in the fashionably sour climate of those who mock patriots and grow angry in petty causes in their own parochial backwaters, to be reminded for a change of a big cause, of what Churchill called our finest hour.

H. E. BATES

Four Absentees. By Rayner Heppenstall. Barrie and Rockliff. 13s. 6d.

Mr. Heppenstall's 'absentees' are his four friends, George Orwell, Dylan Thomas, Eric Gill, and Middleton Murry. Much of his book, however, is a loving detailing of his own rooms and moves in the seedier parts of north London: 'There were candles stuck with their own wax to the mantelpiece... I had stained the floor with permanganate of potash... The desk was a present from the Labour Party women's organizer'. Of his cooking, also. He lived for some days on dollops of flour fried in lard, an excellent recipe, derived from George Orwell, without which he might have starved. The theme is central to the book. For he and his friends stand out in English letters as the last of the Bohemians; the last, and in some ways the noblest. How it runs through the lives of Orwell, Dylan Thomas, and Heppenstall himself, the horror of possessions! Orwell indeed retained a few atavistic heirlooms of his Etonian past, especially a shooting-stick, which he seemed to think indispensable to the enjoyment of the countryside and with which, when for a moment his inherited prejudices got the better of him, he tried to brain the intoxicated Heppenstall. But Orwell's own life was a prolonged attempt to find what one could do without; while Dylan Thomas stole underwear rather than possess his own and thought money such a shameful thing it must be instantly converted into drink. That they both seemed to have had a strong wish to destroy themselves is no doubt part of the same condition of mind. Heppenstall himself, when a friend invited him to buy himself a piece of furniture as a wedding present, chose a chair which was also a bookcase, a writing desk, and a bed, so solving at one stroke the whole problem of possessions.

Heppenstall's interest in Léon Bloy, as is plain from his book about him, sprang from Bloy's mystique of poverty and wrath against the comfortable men of letters. Why his own conversion to catholicism was abortive may, I think, have been because he felt beliefs to be another encumbering kind of property. The experience has made him very acute on the psychology of belief. It is he, for instance, who pointed out the significant fact that in Graham Greene 'to