

# The Listener

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ERIC FRASER.

New Year 1947

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## An Englishman Looks at 1947

By General SIR WILLIAM SLIM

IF somebody said to you, 'By Jove, you are a brick!', you'd like it. Yet a brick, though useful enough, is not notably beautiful or intelligent. So why be flattered? It's an old story. Long ago, in Ancient Greece, a man from one of the great city states was standing outside a small, open town. Turning to one of its leading citizens, he said, contemptuously, 'I don't think much of that for a city! Where are your walls?' The other pointed to his fellow townsmen, going about their daily business, 'There are our walls', he answered, 'every man a brick!'

Better classical scholars than I am will tell you whether that is a true story, but to me it has always been true—true of the British. We have had our great leaders, but so often they have been great, not because they aroused or instigated the faith and will of our race, but because they expressed it. Whenever our freedom—and with ours the freedom of the western world—has been threatened, it has been the sturdy sense and stubborn courage of our whole people that have brought us through the crisis. Ordinary citizens have been our walls, every man—and woman—a brick: the greater the odds, the stouter the acceptance. Four hundred years ago, we faced Philip of Spain, a hundred and fifty years ago, Napoleon; yesterday, Hitler!

And now, we, the same British people who have done all that, stand facing 1947. But, somehow, we do not feel quite like we did a year or two ago. We are dissatisfied, restless, uncertain. It is a

funny thing to say, you know, but we were more at peace, *inside ourselves*, when we were at war. When we fought in and over the deserts of Africa, the jungles of Asia, the plains of Europe, and all the seas of the world, when we worked in our darkened factories and kept our homes together while we scanned the skies for death—then, we knew where we were going. We had an object, plain before us, and it held us up and it held us together. But now we seem—many of us—to lack in peace the incentive, the object, we had in war. What we aim at is blurred and confused; we are apt to lose sight of it altogether. But do not be surprised or unduly discouraged at that. It is natural, and especially natural in a democracy that does its own mental adjustments and does not think to order. Our whole history has alternated between periods when we firmly held to one line, and periods when, lacking a great issue to hold us, we wobbled. Since the end of the war we have been in such a period, pursuing more varied, more petty, more selfish aims. It is time we took our bearings again. We cannot afford to let our periods of wobbling be as long as once we could—history moves too fast these days.

If we look with clear and honest eyes into 1947, we can see our object, plain and unmistakable. It is, and must be, the same as bound us together in those great days of 1940—the survival of our country and of all it stands for, and has stood for, in freedom of body and mind for all men, something so much greater than you or

average. The Red Sea is potentially more productive than the Mediterranean. The Jews have had much success with fish-farming carp. This fish produces more protein per unit area than any other domestic animal.

Dr. Keen describes the peasant as imprisoned within the walls of his own agricultural system. This consists of the trinity of land-tenure, frag-

mentation of holdings and strip cultivation. It is necessary to break out of it, but the social difficulty is very great. For instance, the Government of Cyprus set up an experimental farm of 250 acres. It had to buy out no fewer than 600 persons. In Dr. Keen's opinion, Middle East agriculture requires the creation and preservation of economic farm units. The longer an

equitable solution is deferred, the more likely it is that the peasantry will be driven to the brusque alternative of an agrarian revolution.

Of course, now the war is over, the Middle East Supply Centre has been closed down. It seems that in the Middle East the flights of Minerva's owl are very short, even in the twilight.

## New Novels

*The Little Kingdom.* By Emyr Humphreys. Eyre and Spottiswoode. 9s.

*The Triumph of Death.* By C. F. Ramuz. Routledge. 8s. 6d.

*The Becker Wives.* By Mary Lavin. Michael Joseph. 9s. 6d.

WHAT is the most positive quality we have to recognise in a new novelist in order to feel that his work contains promise as well as immediate success or in spite of immediate failure? It is, I suspect, his style: whether it is already individual or assured, or whether it merely indicates a preoccupation with the act of writing.

A war plays hell with prose. There is always the influx of new technical terms and clichés, there is always the politicians' jargon; these are small in themselves, perhaps, but if they pervade our speech, as they are likely to do when our ideas are confused, they will shortly afterwards pervade our writing also. The most depressing thing that confronts a novel reviewer at the moment is the general beastliness—I have pondered this word before using it—of the various ways in which most novels are written. The mediocre novelists of thirty and forty years ago at least believed that they should try to write well. They believed, if not that a good writer must always appear *en grande tenue*, that the disorder in his dress must be a sweet one. They believed it mattered how a book was written. Of Mr. Emyr Humphreys, a new novelist not unknown as a poet, one can use many nice and conventional expressions: he is worth watching, he is a novelist of whom we shall hear more, he has something to say and he knows how to say it. I think this last thing is the most interesting thing about him. He knows how to write, and you feel as you read him that he knows that apprehension and diction must, in prose and verse alike, be clasped as earnestly as two hands in prayer. I think that the strength of a young writer's religious, political and psychological perceptions are usually less important than his sense of style. Here is a passage from *The Little Kingdom*: it is, as may be guessed, a mere 'bridge-passage' in the action; but it is clearly the work of a very able writer:

The little bell over the door giggled as the minister went in, and echoed the giggle as he closed the door carefully behind him. He screwed up his eyes. After the soft twilight outside, the harsh naked electric light in the barber's shop was painful to him. He said 'Good evening, everybody', but all he could make out at first was the white blur of the barber bending over someone indistinct in the chair. Otherwise the shop was empty; this was the last customer for the night. The barber was too tired to talk to the man, who slumped helpless in the chair. He nodded.

'Evening, minister.'

The man in the chair stirred with curiosity, but the barber held him firm, the fingers of his left hand spread over his ruffled hair like a vice.

'Go through.'

The barber pointed to the swing door with his gleaming razor, which flashed as it caught the light.

'You'll be coming up later, Dan?'

The smiling, perfect male, advertising hair cream, swung back and fore, smile out, smile in.

The last sentence will at once indicate that the 'middle' Joyce has contributed something to the formation of Mr. Humphreys' style. There are few better models for a serious young writer, and an ability to learn something from the first half of *Ulysses* will probably imply a kindred sensitiveness to the coalescence of sight, sound and thought in the human consciousness. The feelings which attend on being alive do not escape Mr. Humphreys, any more than they escaped Joyce.

The action of *The Little Kingdom* concerns the last months in the life of a dominating and imperious young Welsh nationalist who, to further his ambitions, murders a wealthy uncle, and later sets fire to an English-built aerodrome. He is shot and killed by a night watchman. I take it that one of the main ideas behind the book is the common turning aside of an idealistic political movement, first into 'irresponsible' acts, and then into *Fuehrerprinzip*. This is a respectable theme, though not a very distinctive or profound one; but it has the advantage common to all well-tried themes that it shifts the reader's interest to the writer's talents as a particular interpreter and executant. One is curious to see how he will use his gifts. And to have emphasised Mr. Humphreys' ability to write is not to diminish his other powers. There is a touching reality about his characters—almost all of whom are muddled and pathetic. I believe that the hero-villain Owen, who is neither muddled nor pathetic, is slightly under-emphasised; though the author's avoidance of an opposite effect is doubtless intentional; Owen's first appearance is admirable. The major scenes of the book are ably got through; though for some reason it is the semi-marginal scenes that one remembers best—the opening chapter describing a morning tour made by Owen's uncle Richard, or the waiting scene on the night of the fire. It is a most remarkable intuition that makes the author delay our first and only glimpse of Richard's beloved daughter, Nest, till the moment after her death: a most curious and effective piece of understatement, for Nest is the figure on whom the subsequent action turns.

Mr. Humphreys holds our attention by the way he gets from one point of his story to the next, by certain felicitous interior echoes, by his movements from one contributory stream of activity to another. I think that a greater tragedy is needed for a writer to be able successfully to use a village lunatic—a *Mayor of Casterbridge*, for example—but Mr. Humphreys obviously conceives of an art serious enough to include such a dangerous piece of machinery.

It is curious that the Swiss novelist C. F. Ramuz should be so little known in this country; he is obviously a very remarkable and original writer, and one is inclined to believe the extensive claims made for him by M. Denis de Rougemont in his admirable introduction to *The Triumph of Death*. This is a translation, by

Allan Ross MacDougall and Alex Comfort, of a book called *Présence de la Mort*, a better and more accurate title which it is strange to find rejected. It is a fable about the end of life on earth: disaster comes as the earth steadily and rapidly approaches the sun. The scene is set mainly on a lakeside in the Vaud country of Switzerland. It is perhaps with some misgiving that one embarks on reading such a story. It is written fancifully, and at first promises to be little more than an over-long prose-poem. I remembered, and expected to prefer, H. G. Wells's story 'The Star'. But Ramuz' book surprises and excites by its peculiar mounting intensity; one succumbs, and consents to the author's apparently arbitrary ordering of his material. Many of his scenes have great beauty; and he keeps one agog to know the end, which turns out to be both tender and wonderful. His scenes of anarchy, demoralisation and criminality are very moving, and they are never indulged in for the private delight of their author. There are many moments when the book shows signs of having offered to its translators some of the difficulties that works like Rimbaud's *Les Illuminations* offer; but on the whole the book comes over vividly and well. It is doubtless a point of preciosity in the original that present and past tenses are pointlessly mingled; but English seems particularly odd when such a mannerism is grafted on to it. It is to be hoped that Mr. MacDougall and Mr. Comfort will soon address themselves to the task of translating the sequel, *Joie dans le Ciel*. These books, incidentally, are not allegories about our recent disasters; the date of *Présence de la Mort* is 1925.

Miss Mary Lavin is a most prolific and varied writer. She is, so far, at her best in comedy. Her serious writing is often commonplace, and it is noticeable that when the first story in her new book, after an excellent beginning, takes a turn into the pathological, it is a turn for the worse. But there are few writers now writing in English capable of more sustained comic scenes—scenes where the comedy depends not on conversation so much as on large-scale conception of a theme. The high spot in Miss Lavin's prodigiously long novel, *The House in Clewe Street*, was the brilliant scene where two funeral cortéges attempted to race each other to the cemetery; there is a similar *vis comica* pervading two stories in the new book: 'Magenta' and 'The Joy-ride', both about surreptitious outings made by servants. Intermittently throughout the book there is to be found Miss Lavin's particular talent for startlingly transfixing a scene: the moment in 'The Becker Wives' where Flora makes the stolidly respectable family involuntarily pose for an imaginary photograph, for example, or the vision of the upstart kitchen-vestal Magenta crossing the park in her borrowed finery. It is with regret that one adds that Miss Lavin's grammar is so bad that from time to time one gazes at it in surprise.

HENRY REED