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BLACK-OUT IN BUSH HOUSE

IN the opening words of his speech last Friday, Mr. Bevin alluded to "the awful black-out over Europe," and added, "this is creating in that great territory a spiritual hunger which is more devastating even than physical hunger." This is a welcome change. We have a Foreign Secretary who recognises that the import of information into Europe is almost as vital as the import of supplies. Throughout the whole war, the Foreign Office regarded our overseas information services with profound suspicion. That they failed to reduce them to anodyne ineffectiveness was due largely to the spirit displayed by the staff of the European Service of the B.B.C., the Ministry of Information and of the Political Warfare Executive. Practically the whole of the staff in Bush House were temporary officials, recruited from journalism, University teaching and other professions. They could fight for their principles because they had not to worry about their post-war careers. As a result, the British information services generally—and in particular the European Service of the B.B.C.—gave a moral lead to the whole Resistance movement. For the first time in history they brought the peoples of Europe into daily touch not with "Government opinion" as represented by Ambassadors, but with the downright thoughts and feelings of the British people.

The effects on British prestige were immense. For years a spiritually famished Europe was sustained by the B.B.C. programmes and the leaflets, newspapers and booklets produced by the Political Warfare Executive. As each country was liberated, it was supplied with magazines and films produced by the Ministry of Information. For the first time, the British point of view—as distinct from the British Council point of view—was "got over" to our friends and to the defeated enemy.

As soon as the war was over, powerful forces began to break up these unconventional war-time services. The Foreign Office began to emasculate them—on the plea that "propaganda" is a dirty business which we should dispense with in peace time—and tried to bring them under its

direct control. The B.B.C. hierarchy, which during the war, lost control of the European service, and was therefore jealous of its immense success—took away its best wavelengths and began to bring its programmes down to the "non-political" level of the Home Service. The natural process of attrition, by which the "temporary" returns to his peace-time profession as soon as he can, accelerated the disintegration. When, however, the Labour Government came to power, it was hoped that something would be done to stop the rot.

Despite Mr. Bevin's warning last Friday, this has not happened. The Government having come to no decision, the war-time services have in fact begun to disintegrate during the summer, and the B.B.C. hierarchy has asserted itself in Bush House.

The removal of the two senior officials responsible for the Spanish service—followed by the suspension of the political commentaries of both the Spanish and Portuguese services—is a glaring illustration of this deplorable process. Mr. Haley, supported by important people in the Foreign Office, wants a nice harmless "British Council" type of broadcast which will evoke no protests from General Franco or our Catholic Press Attaché in Madrid. He, therefore, suspends the editors and suppresses the commentaries which have cautiously—far too cautiously—expressed the attitude of the British people to the Franco regime. When the officials concerned ask the reason for their removal, they are accused of permitting their personal views to influence their conduct; and dark hints are given of Foreign Office displeasure. The real fact is that they have attempted, despite the obstruction of Catholic controllers—one in the Foreign Office and two in Bush House—to maintain the democratic spirit of war-time broadcasting, and to interpret faithfully Mr. Bevin's assurance that he would welcome "a change" in Spain. For this crime they have lost their jobs.

The policy which has resulted in these dismissals now pervades the whole service. But un-

fortunately the Minister of Information, who does not even know if his Department will exist next month, has no power to interfere. The Foreign Secretary, who in Spanish and Portuguese eyes will be held to have ordered these dismissals, issues no directive to the B.B.C. And so Mr. Haley gets away with it, and the world assumes that Bevin is truckling to Franco. All the immense good will earned during the war by our information services is permitted to be dissipated. Europe, listening to Mr. Haley's new bromidic programmes, concludes that Britain, wearied by her titanic war effort, has lapsed back into her pre-war slough of appeasement. "The new order changeth giving place to old"—under a Labour Government.

The situation would be tragic, were it not so easily remedied. Let the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Minister of Information get together at once, and decide on the peace-time structure of the services. After all, the B.B.C. Charter is due for renewal next year; and the new House of Commons will not tolerate a broadcasting monopoly which suspends its editors merely for expressing the British democratic spirit in broadcasts to Fascist Spain.

Chungking and Yenan

Last August, when the Chinese Communists—concluding from the Moscow-Chungking pact over Manchuria that they were unlikely to receive active support from the U.S.S.R.—sent their leader, Mao Tse-tung, to discuss "unity" with Chiang Kai-shek, hopes quickened that the threat of civil war in China might be averted. This optimism was premature. Though agreement was reached on the desirability of fusing the Kuomintang and the Border Government in an all-party Council of China, Chungking's demand that the whole of the Communist Army should be disbanded or placed under the Marshal's command was unacceptable to Yenan. And now, according to the latest reports, fighting on a considerable scale between the rival forces has broken out in North China, whose strategic

some insistence which cannot mention Mr. Carker without harping on his teeth, spoils many an otherwise admirable passage.

It is customary to regard the earlier part of this book—up to the death of Little Paul—as by far the best; some readers even fail to survive the appearance of Edith. Those who so fail miss one of the finest pieces of psychological and descriptive writing Dickens ever achieved: I mean Mr. Carker's flight across France, and his death under the wheels of a locomotive. It was a clever imaginative stroke to have introduced the railway motive early in the book. Its sinister music, mitigated by the neighbourhood of the adorable Toodles, forms as it were a bridge between Florence and her stepmother, who meet first in the stark and unwilling mind of Mr. Dombey. The passage prepares us, in a symphonic sense, for the later chapter, where another, equally troubled mind grinds on its immitigable course:

He could not think to any purpose. He could not separate one subject of reflection from another, sufficiently to dwell upon it, by itself, for a minute at a time. The crash of his project for the gaining of a voluptuous compensation for past restraint; the overthrow of his treachery to one who had been true and generous to him, but whose least proud word and look he had treasured up, at interest, for years—for false and subtle men will always secretly despise and dislike the object upon which they fawn, and always resent the payment and receipt of homage that they know to be worthless; these were the themes uppermost in his mind. A lurking rage against the woman who had so entrapped him and avenged herself was always there; crude and misshapen schemes of retaliation upon her, floated in his brain; but nothing was distinct. A hurry and contradiction pervaded all his thoughts. Even while he was so busy with this fevered, ineffectual thinking, his one constant idea was, that he would postpone reflection until some indefinite time.

But the chapter must be read as a whole, and compared, for interest, with those greater chapters which describe the despair of Emma Bovary and of Anna Karenina. For there are points at which the greatest novelists meet each other's eyes; and we hold our breath in astonishment, waiting for the terrible moment to pass.

LIONEL CRANFIELD

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NEW FICTION

The Demon Lover. By ELIZABETH BOWEN

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To the Boating. By INEZ HOLDEN. Bodley

Head. 7s. 6d.

First Impressions. By ISOBEL STRACHEY. Cape. 7s. 6d.

It is not an accident that in her little book on the English novelists Miss Elizabeth Bowen should have written so well of Thomas Hardy and Henry James. Hardy, it will be remembered, thought poorly of *The Reverberator*, James not altogether well of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*; and the two giants had little in common except their occasional dependence on a hard centre of melodrama—cruder, surprisingly enough, in James than in Hardy. Miss Bowen has something in common with both of them, though she manages to avoid their improbabilities, and she has enough of the true radiance of art to justify one's mentioning them. She shares Hardy's love of architectonics and of atmosphere: what Hardy will make of a woodland, heath, or starve-acre farm, she will make of a house or a summer night; and so far as persons go, I think the creator of *Tess* and Eustacia would have admired the drawing of Portia and Anna in Miss Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*. And she shares with Henry James a love of seeing how a story can be persuaded to present problems of artistry in the presentation of the "point of view"; and a curiosity (it is not the same as belief) about the supernatural and about the ambiguous territory between the supernatural and the natural. She has not James's sense of "the black and merciless things that are behind great possessions." Evil itself does not intrude on her world. It is not evil, but experience (they are not dissimilar, perhaps, but they are not the same) that corrodes the innocent people at the core of her books.

In her new collection of stories it is frequently obvious that she shares James's preoccupation with style; she has that kind of exact awareness of all she wishes to say, which makes her know precisely where a sentence needs to be a little distorted, or where an unusual word needs to be used. She has as well that gift which prose can share with poetry: the ability to concentrate the emotions of a scene, or a sequence of thoughts, or even a moral, into an unforgettable sentence or phrase with a beauty of expression extra to the sense:

The newly-arrived clock, chopping off each second to fall and perish, recalled how many

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seconds had gone to make up her years, how many of these had been either null or bitter, how many had been void before the void claimed them. Or again, about the present day:

He thought, with nothing left but our brute courage, we shall be nothing but brutes.

Her short stories possess the qualities of her novels, but inevitably the atmosphere in her short stories is richer and more concentrated. The more elaborate of them suggest the climaxes or the elements of novels, but in a necessarily muted or diminished form; it is their atmosphere which moulds them, and which at times perhaps even brings them into existence. A perfect example of this is the first story in the book, "In the Square." Little happens in it, but enough strands are gathered together to give a sense of tension, climax and relief. And the relief is achieved mainly by atmospheric means. The story is about a few people living on in a partially bombed house in a ravaged London square. The principal feeling one has about them is their terrible independence of each other; all of them have mysterious, irregular relationships, unhappy and furtive. One has a feeling that what remains in the house, that reluctant proximity of the unconnected, is not what a house is meant to enclose. This is what war has done: to houses, to people. It is a true enough observation; but what startles one is the fact that one suddenly becomes aware that the early evening is spectacularly merging into late; the time of day is changing and a shift in the emotions of all the characters is coinciding with this. A mere observation has become a story quivering with subtle, dramatic life.

The war, and the subtly degrading effect of the war, hold these stories together as a collection. They have great variety and many attractions. One thinks particularly of their comedy and their dialogue; the story called "Careless Talk" is a brilliantly literal interpretation of that official phrase; "Mysterious Kör" has a wonderful conversation draped round evocations from a poem by—Rider Haggard; the woman in "Ivy Grippled the Steps" is a strong enough figure for a novel. But it is probably those stories which involve the supernatural that are most striking. "The Demon Lover" itself, a ghost story of the traditional kind, is horrible enough, though not of Miss Bowen's best. In some of the others—"Pink May" and "The Inherited Clock," for example—the ghostliness is blown into existence by, or from, something real; and always, even when the boundary into the abnormal is passed, the normal still accompanies us.

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ROUTLEDGE

The finest story in the book, and the most ambitious, is called "The Happy Autumn Fields." It begins in the past—perhaps seventy or eighty years ago. Various members of a large family are taking a late afternoon walk across the fields of their estate; at a moment of particularly painful emotion for one of the characters, Sarah, the story breaks off, and we are switched to the present: to a partly bombed house where a woman called Mary is waking from the scene we have just read about; it is not the first dream about that epoch she has had, though her real link with it is tenuous; nevertheless her dream has become obsessive, stronger and more attractive than her own life. The scene changes to the old family again, and we find that that afternoon in the fields Sarah has had a black-out which has projected her for a moment into a world nameless and horrible—our own, we gather. The final scene is back in the bombed house, with Mary sorrowing over the irrecoverable day from the past which has blown into and out of her life:

I am left with a fragment torn out of a day, a day I don't even know where or when; and now how am I to help laying that like a pattern against the poor stuff of everything else?—Alternatively, I am a person drained by a dream. I cannot forget the climate of those hours. Or life at that pitch, eventful—not happy, no, but strung like a harp. . . . It is, like "The Turn of the Screw," a story which provokes interpretation and commentary; but since it is, in a serious sense, a discovery, there remains about it something of its own, at once inexplicable and profoundly satisfying. No living writer has, I think, produced a finer collection of stories than this.

Miss Inez Holden is well known for her skilful reporting of factory life. *To the Boating* is offered as a collection of short stories. But in most of them the bridge between reporting and art has not been crossed. In the first story, "Musical Chairman," there is an excellent account of a series of pathetic and amusing interviews between the Chairman of a Local Appeal Board and various people who are rebelling against the Essential Work Orders. But the fancy bits of story-telling in which Miss Holden has arbitrarily framed these scenes are so artificially stuck on that one wonders that they have not been blown away in the proof-reading. It is a drab collection of oddments that Miss Holden has put together. And she shows, furthermore, a taste for drabness for its own sake. The book concludes with three fanciful little satires:

presumably in order to deaden any excitement which these might arouse in the reader, Miss Holden has chosen to swathe them in the grey, vague mists of Basic English.

The habit, common enough in contemporary poets, of publishing work of an elementary or even infantile nature, is spreading to writers of fiction. Shown to one in manuscript, Miss Holden's stories and Mrs. Strachey's novel, *First Impressions*, might reveal promise; one would note passages of humour or observation. Why, then, does one pass over these when the books appear in print? Doubtless because the books challenge comparison with the early work of writers who seem to have tested themselves more rigorously and more critically before emerging into print. *Amateurish* is the deplorable word that one cannot avoid in mentioning Mrs. Strachey's novel. It is supposedly a satire on the leisured life of the Twenties. Possibly Mrs. Strachey has seen that life, but there is nothing in this rambling, unformed little book that could not have been got from many another social satire. Bad syntax and petty indecency are no substitute for the slickness and wit which some satirists achieve in their first books, and which it is hard for a satirist to do without. And the title of Mrs. Strachey's book goes no way to excuse its muddle.

HENRY REED

TRUTH AND PUBLIC OPINION

Truth and the Public. By KINGSLEY MARTIN. Watts. 2s. and 1s.

This little book, which contains Mr. Kingsley Martin's Conway Memorial Lecture, raises and pursues an astonishing number of very important, highly controversial issues. They are all connected with truth and public opinion, but the fundamental question with which he is concerned is the relation between truth, reason, and politics. He looks at it primarily from the journalistic, the editorial angle—and it is a very good angle from which to survey it—but he is a highly historical and philosophically minded editor.

Mr. Martin rightly begins with Bentham and the Utilitarians who were the progenitors of that peculiar brand of liberalism which dominated democracy and democratic thought through the latter part of the nineteenth century. He records, as others have done, their pathetic belief in political sanitation to be accomplished by education, reason, truth, cheap news, and leading articles. The problem of the political relation between truth, reason, and public opinion is

more difficult and complicated than most Benthamites and their liberal disciples thought, and they were, no doubt, too optimistic in their belief that, if men know the truth, they will probably act rationally. Like their critics, they had not the advantage of knowing many things which would happen after they were dead. And since they died, the exasperating pendulum of history has swung to the exact opposite position of that which it occupied when the world seemed on the point of regeneration by philosophic radicalism. Two world wars separated by a Nazi and Fascist peace constitute a powerful antidote to any tendency to social optimism. But the swing of the pendulum is not the best guide and director of thought, and the reaction against utilitarianism and liberalism has gone too far. Mr. Martin himself recognises this and in his last page goes back to John Stuart Mill. The Benthamites were not really so silly or so silly optimistic as most people—even to some extent Mr. Martin—tell us they were. Even the wisest of us are sometimes incautious or exaggerated in the way in which we state our beliefs, and it is possible by quotation to reduce Bentham and Mill to absurdities. But they are often unfairly ridiculed by the common trick of representing their belief that an ideal was attainable as a belief that it would be attained. The proof of mental puddings is in the eating, and I dare anyone to read Mill's famous political writings and honestly say that they leave a taste of political optimism in the mouth.

The Utilitarians were right in seeing that democracy must stand or fall on truth and reason. It implies the ultimate responsibility of government to public opinion. Unless the public knows the truth, can understand it, and bases upon it rational political opinion, democracy will be just as stupid and savage a form of human social organisation as the monarchies, the aristocracies, or dictatorships which have disgraced human history. Everyone to-day recognises the menace to truth and reason in those terrific engines of obscurantism, invented since Mill's day—the newspaper and the radio—and Mr. Martin's admirable discussion of their influence merits close and careful study. No one who has lived through the last twenty-five years will be over-optimistic about the possibility of dealing with this menace, but there are a few facts which should prevent us throwing in our hands in despair. Mr. Martin points out in one place that we have never attempted to use either our

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