

BOOKS OF THE WEEK

AN APPRECIATION by SIR CHARLES PETRIE

The lost heiress

The Gascoyne Heiress, by Carola Oman. Hodder and Stoughton, 50s.

THE LADY whom Miss Oman has very wisely and skilfully rescued from obscurity was the daughter of Bamber Gascoyne of Childwall Hall, which the older generation of Liverpool citizens still remember as a delightful rural spot in the days before the First World War. In 1821 she married Lord Cranborne, who in due course became the second Marquess of Salisbury, and in so doing gave the Cecils their Lancashire connections as well as considerable wealth. She was only 37 when she died, but among a numerous family she was the mother of Robert Cecil, who in due course became Queen Victoria's prime minister. Hitherto Frances Mary Gascoyne has chiefly appeared in footnotes and passing references, but Miss Oman has made extensive use of her diaries, with the result that we now not only see her as an outstanding social figure, but are able to look at the world of her day through her extremely critical eyes.

The heiress was a shrewd observer of human nature, and the only person who was immune from criticism in her eyes was the Duke of Wellington, who was something of a father-figure to her. Indeed, so blind was she to his shortcomings, that as she describes him he seems to have been a good deal of a bore, continually talking about his campaigns, but possibly this is unfair criticism, and it may well have been that he did so because she and her friends were for ever

pestering him. When she married into the Cecil family their genius had been dormant since the great days of Burghley and Robert Cecil, and it is by no means improbable that the new blood which she introduced may have been responsible for its remarkable revival during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

She was undoubtedly a stronger character than her husband, whom Miss Oman describes at the time of their marriage as "debonair, quite fearless, already slightly eccentric, high-handed and passionate." Eccentric he certainly was, for although he held high office in more than one Conservative administration, yet on April 4, 1848, the committee of the Carlton Club was informed that on two successive days during the previous week he had "wilfully broken down" the dinner-boards in the coffee room. His colleagues—for he was himself on the committee—thereupon ordered that the boards should be immediately repaired, and that he should defray the expense of this, while a rider was added to the effect that "The Committee in communicating this resolution desires to express their regret that the circumstances should have occurred." The noble marquess duly paid up, but it may be that the real reason for this violence was not natural waywardness but annoyance at some item on the bill of fare, for he was already on record as complaining that the fish was bad. However this may be, the incident took place long after the death of his wife, so perhaps while she was alive his eccentricity was kept under control.

Strong Tory as the heiress was, she was by no means blind to what she considered the faults of other Tories, and the first time she met Disraeli she noted that "he is evidently very clever, but superlatively vulgar." Peel was another statesman for whom she clearly had no great liking. To Talleyrand she was clearly drawn, and after sitting next to him at dinner she comments, "He seldom joins in general conversation, but occasionally delivers an opinion in a short epigrammatic sentence which is never forgotten", thus resembling Georges Clemenceau in more recent times. In view of the course of events in contemporary France, the Continental scene was never far absent from the minds of those whose names appear on these pages. It seems to have been generally agreed by those who were entitled to express an opinion that Charles X was a better man, but a much worse monarch, than Louis XVIII, and that if Louis had lived the Revolution of 1850 would not have taken place. As Talleyrand put it, Louis had "no prejudices, and was not the King of a party".

The background against which the social life of the period was set could hardly have been more gloomy: it was the age of the Gate Street conspiracy and the Reform riots in Britain, and of the *Trois Glorieuses* across the Channel. Fear of revolution was prevalent everywhere, and Wellington was the arch-pessimist in this respect: even the loyalty of the Army was in doubt, and when Lord Salisbury assumed in conversation that

in the event of civil war the Duke would be obeyed by the troops implicitly the other replied, "There is nothing on earth that I am more certain of than that I should not." He thought, however, that the revolution would come without bloodshed, but that "all our ancient institutions will be destroyed by the due course of law, the property of the rich will be attacked in various ways". In retrospect where the Duke was wrong was in estimating that all this would come sooner rather than later.

The Royal Family was definitely unpopular, and when William IV died our diarist wrote, "The shops are, most of them, partly closed today, but I see no marks of feeling of any sort otherwise. One would not suppose that anything extraordinary had happened." It took his successor many years to regain for the throne the respect of the country, though in this connection it is interesting to be told that in Wellington's opinion "Princess Charlotte would have turned out quite as ill as her mother, and her death was a blessing to the country." He may, however, have been prejudiced by her habit of calling him by his Christian name, which the victor of Waterloo apparently considered to be unduly familiar conduct on the part of a royal personage.

Miss Oman has performed her task with her accustomed accuracy and attention to detail: she knows the period thoroughly, but lets her learning sit lightly upon her. A better Christmas present for young or old it would be difficult to imagine.

NEW FICTION by DOMINIC LE FOE

Time dances on

The Military Philosophers, by Anthony Powell. Heinemann, 25s.**The Wild Cherry Tree**, by H. E. Bates. Michael Joseph, 25s.**The Image Men**, by J. B. Priestley. Heinemann, 35s.**The First Circle**, by Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Collins-Harvill, 42s.

THERE IS A WONDERFUL CERTAINTY engendered by the two-volume novel; not only can one pick up where one left off (a pleasure that dedicated readers will readily recognize) but one can learn to know the author rather as one can learn to love and know one's port. Mr Powell's latest book is far along the road from the two-volume novel. *The Military Philosophers* is, in fact, the ninth volume of the novel called *A Dance To The Music of Time*, and is the third leg of the war trilogy.

I have not followed all nine volumes, but reading *The Military Philosophers* causes me to feel my loss, and I shall repair the omission. Anthony Powell writes with what is best described as technique. His book resembles those elegant little specimen cabinets one sometimes found in Edwardian drawing rooms, the faded velvet trying to keep its pile in the face of continual battering from a thousand unconsidered trifles.

As the title implies, this section of his novel deals with those called upon by fate and feeling to play their part in that vast unplanned canvas that was our most recent World War. The narrator is plunged into a life linked with the War Office, and dealing with the rich assortment of foreign allies who found refuge and a war base. He meets those friends and acquaintances who had graced hunt balls and board rooms, school and university eight. He passes through the valley of paranoia when grown men talked of "going red" when they meant achieving staff rank. The book closes at that moment of catharsis, familiar to so

many, at Olympia when the demob suits were handed out, and our hero makes his first decision that leads back to civilian life, namely, to accept all the civilian garb on offer except the underwear.

It is in his marshalling of these trifles that Mr Powell contrives so successfully to bottle the essence of the times of which he writes. There is an elegance to his style that is brilliantly supported by the steel thread of his narrative, and one is delighted to recognize that *The Military Philosophers* is another splendid manifestation of a remarkable literary enterprise.

No one leaps more happily into the world of escape and fantasy than does H. E. Bates. There are few authors I accompany so willingly. His new publication, *The Wild Cherry Tree*, which is a collection of ten short stories, is again a welcome addition to any reading table. Mr Bates possesses an eagle eye; it is well matched with a sharp pen, and his armoury is further strengthened by a gentle wit and a sense of true pathos. Take "Same Time, Same Place," for example. The heroine, Miss Treadwell, is a lady of circumstances so reduced as to be non-existent. In seven short paragraphs he sketches an entire way of life for a genteel soul desperately trying to maintain appearances on a pittance. His survival plan includes such ploys as living on bread, margarine, and tea; of the necessity of ordering pots of tea in tea shops, and so gain access to the cube-sugar bowl, and even perhaps some abandoned tips; to the propriety of visiting the public *Ladies* in the park, where there was the sporting chance of reclaiming other people's lost cosmetics. In 14 pages the saga of Miss Treadwell is both comic and heartbreaking—and one cares to the last full stop.

Halibut Jones, another rich creation, is in a quite different sort of situation. He is a bucolic con-man, who knows to a

nicety how to sub an advance payment, or a healthgiving meal of homemade bread and three kinds of cheese, as well as he knows the way to the local public house. Within the tiny canvas we see Halibut Jones writ large, and although we may deplore his ethics, we laugh at his outrageous morality because we know that Halibut Jones is the third cousin of our own *alter ego*. "The Wild Cherry Tree" which gives its name to the collection is a poignant story of rare insight and invention. Indeed, Mr Bates has favoured us with ten gems—graduated, gleaming, polished by a master craftsman, and set by an artist.

Graven images were proscribed in the Old Testament. I wonder what the prophets would have made of today's image chisellers? In his own considerable way Mr Priestley is something of a twentieth-century prophet, and in his book *The Image Men* tells us what he thinks. Mr Priestley is one of that select band of authors who engender feelings of friendship as one reaches for their latest book. Long a boon companion, creator of books one returns to again and again, every new publication of his is an agreeable reunion.

So it is with *The Image Men*. That is not to say that Mr Priestley has never written better—indeed he has—but this is a book that from any other pen would be hailed as a minor masterpiece, and we recognize the hand of the highly skilled and professional author. Not only that, Mr Priestley is a born storyteller, and we bounce along in his rumbustious wake delighting in his fearless invention, and savouring the fun of a richly comic novel.

The central characters are Professor Cosmo Saltana (a distant cousin of Daisy Ashford's hero?) and Dr Own Tuby who create the Institute of Social Imagistics. Their success is based largely on their own instincts, some interesting young ladies on the staff, and the services

of a bogus computer whose flashing red and green lights were secured from a theatrical property company. It is a great gutsy book, as hearty as a cool Guinness in a warm bar, and entertaining on every page. Peopled with characters as richly drawn as may be, it offers immensely amusing sidelights on Army recruiting, pop stars, Members of Parliament, and others whose "images" are brought to the Institute for running repairs or reconstruction. Written for fun—and fun to read.

There is not much fun in *The First Circle*, the newest book of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's to be published in Britain. Set in 1949, when Russia was in the paroxysm of Stalin's terror, it spans just three days. Its central character is arrested for trying to warn an old family friend of impending arrest. He is sent to Mavrino, a "special" prison where gifted scientists and others are imprisoned but still devote their talents to the State. Here it is clear that the warders suffer almost as much as the prisoners; for the prisoners can find some comfort in the very helplessness of their situation. "When we have lost everything we have nothing to fear." It shows the cruel toll taken by a heartless system on those who break even slightly the rules, and it underlines the heartrending tragedy implicit in a great nation of gifted and industrious people weighed down by a tyrannous bureaucracy staffed at the top by evil and vindictive men.

There are moments of rare pathos in this compelling story; there are rarer moments of humour. Mr Solzhenitsyn has not only a majestic intellect which fully comprehends the unnamed terrors of tyranny, he has a pen that glows white hot with compassion. Historically of profound interest, as a literary work it must rank high on the list of major novels of the last decade. I found it brutally readable and painfully disturbing.