

equivocal human type, the mountebank who is half genuine and really does get things done. But under this theatrical exterior there was a curiously plodding, almost lugubrious side. He and Hesketh, his assistant, were a pair of solemn, nagging drolls. In the midst of war they sat down with the owliness of adolescents—and American adolescents at that—and argued conscientiously whether it was better to be “intuitional” about the truck (Rathbone) or “rational” about it (Hesketh). They tabulated each other’s shortcomings like schoolmasters, and slowly went over the finer points with the delicacy of farm tractors. And all so fraternally and so concerned, always expository never resentful. From Hemingway they had taken on an awful pseudo-toughness. They were always apologising for “getting tough” with “guys.” And, fundamentally, they were irresponsible. Happily they were soft-hearted and practical about “kids” and one of the really vivid and revealing moments is when Dr. Rathbone goes tough in Almeria and snatches the bread from the soldiers so that the exhausted refugee children shall have bread and milk, instead of being half killed with a diet of fried eggs and potatoes.

The pair must have been bores in life; in literature they are fascinating. Writers should never avoid bores. The end of the Doc was typical. For some time, as the war grew more orderly and reputable, he had been distraught and a trifle sulky. He was evidently preoccupied with thoughts of being the Henry Irving of a bigger stage. He philosophised,

“Death,” he said. “What is it, after all? It’s a terrible thing. . . . And yet, it’s a mean thing. A noble thing . . . and yet a petty thing. Glorious . . . and yet ignominious. Proud . . . yet somehow humble. The Greatest Tragedy . . . and the Greatest Comedy . . .”

And so, a Falstaff of the dictaphone and the press interview, he went off to try blood transfusion on the 8th Route Army in China.

V. S. PRITCHETT

NEW NOVELS

- John Arnison.** By EDWARD THOMPSON. *Macmillan.* 7s. 6d.
Our Lives Are Swiss. By PETER CHAMBERLAIN. *Hamish Hamilton.* 7s. 6d.
Nanking Road. By VICKI BAUM. *Bles.* 8s. 6d.
My Uncle Silas. By H. E. BATES. *Cape.* 10s. 6d.
John Innocent at Oxford. By RICHARD BUCKLE. *Chatto and Windus.* 5s.

It is the critic’s cross and the writer’s ruin that there is no adequate definition of the novel, and that distinctions made readily in practice are not so easily justified in theory. Carlyle’s panegyric of the horrible Frederick, for instance, has more in common with *Salammbô* than the latter has with *I, Claudius*; while the gap separating William from Henry James is not so vast as that lying between such catalogue-companions as Dunne and Freud, or Gibbon and Bishop Stubbs. General reviewing has become specialised, and the critic is no longer expected to be master of every subject. The novel-reviewer, however, is credited with the universality of Shakespeare and the catholic taste of a jackdaw; and might, if he worked for an old-established and rather dilatory journal, be expected to assess and compare *Jane Eyre*, *Esther Waters*, *War and Peace* and *Two-gun Tex* in a single brief article. The quality by which the novel is usually defined—that of describing imaginary persons and events—is neither satisfactory nor exclusive, for it both includes such direct and accurate biographies as *Sons and Lovers*, and rejects a great many histories and reminiscences that are really fiction of the most sensational sort. In truth, the word “novel” has lost any meaning it possessed, and become no more than a fashionable label to recommend unpopular wares. A travelogue won’t sell? Then call it *Flight from a Lady*. Philosophy is too arid? Then throw in wit, some parody and a few comic butts, and call it *After Many a Summer*. Following religious controversy, epic poetry, and the drama, fiction has in our time become the prevailing literary mode, and the true novelists are swamped beneath a flood of sensitive, intelligent, quite uncreative people in search of self-expression. Most modern novelists would, if they could, write in another form, but in their efforts to satisfy public demand have hamstrung their own best abilities. It might be fairest for the critic to class each novel separately, and judge many not as fiction but as the type of book their author truly intended.

John Arnison is an admirable and attractive study of Edwardian nonconformity, superficially disguised as a novel. Mr. Thompson claims that after nearly two hundred years of persecution and

disability, nonconformity burst into flower, and was, for a brief space, England's spiritual and intellectual driving force. John, a young member of that narrow but entertaining Arnison family to which we have already been introduced, is used as a pavlovian dog to demonstrate the movements of the pre-war *zeitgeist*, and reacts appropriately to every appropriate stimulus. We see him bored and exploited as a bank clerk, torn unhappily between God plus respectability and God plus the labour theory of value, thrown upon his own resources as a local preacher, and, finally, more or less reconciled to an active part in the class struggle. Mr. Thompson writes well, is patently sincere, and possesses, like Dickens, the rare ability to create characters who are also "characters," and may well become the clichés of his imitators. Yet *John Arnison* is not a success; for in his efforts to be simultaneously story-teller and social historian, the author falls between two stalls and will satisfy neither of his potential audiences. Mr. Thompson is a fluent narrator, and his picture of John's slavery at the Bank is reminiscent of Bennett at his pawkiest. But he seems to feel guilty about diluting his message with entertainment, and as soon as John smells the spiritual battle, he ceases to be a pleasantly convincing young fellow, and becomes the colourless playground of rather colourless ideas. The novel errs equally in the other direction. It has a great deal to say about the historical position and importance of nonconformity, but is continually hampered by a sense of obligation to the plot, so that John is tiresomely thrust in where the angels should have been left to sport by themselves. But although *John Arnison* fails, it is worth reading as a serious book in the true sense of the word;

characters on the scene? *Nanking Road* contains long passages from what could have been at least three good novels, but as soon as one begins to grip the attention we are whirled away to another, until the effect is that of nine straight plays cut into sketches and combined in a non-stop revue. Aristotle has a lot to answer for.

My Uncle Silas may well become a minor classic. Some of the Silas stories have been published before, and their cranky, crotchety, Rabelasian hero is familiar to Mr. Bates' admirers. Silas cannot be described in a short review, for he is a creature of epic individuality, whose wit, vainglory and lust for cowslip wine can only be recounted in the set phrases and telling adjectives of his creator. Those who know him will want no recommendation; those who do not need only remember that Mr. Bates is one of the most capable of living short-story writers. The book, incidentally, is produced in quarto and attractively illustrated by Edward Ardizzone.

John Innocent at Oxford is a fantasy with a good basic idea. Mr. Buckle imagines Oxford at the end of this century metamorphosed into a rococo Tyre and Sidon, with homosexual negro scouts, a Vice-Chancellor of anti-papal wickedness and splendour, and a dim Mr. Deeds to serve as commentator. Unfortunately, Mr. Buckle is inventive but not imaginative, pretentious but not polished, derivative but not from Beerbohm. He should have read his manuscript again next morning.

JOHN MAIR

A PROPHET OF THE PAST