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INTRODUCTION

By H. E. Bates

THOSE who lived in the countryside of southern England in 1940 and 1941 will not forget it. In both years the midsummer weather was magnificent; the longest days of the year were perpetually beautiful, warm and blue. But these two summers will remain remarkable in memory not only as strange meteorological parallels, but because of a series of great accessory events. Unlike the splendid weather, without which they could not have happened, these events were totally dissimilar and yet were manifestations of the same thing. This thing, which has been called a good many names but which in fact was the defence of these islands, filled the cloudless skies of both summers with many planes. The great difference in the two summers lay in this: in 1940 it seemed that four-fifths of these planes were German, coming in from the coast; in 1941 it was quite certain that four-fifths of them were planes of the R.A.F., going outward towards the coast.

Some part of the reason for the great difference in these two beautiful summers that were otherwise so alike can be seen in this book. In America, a year or two ago, there was published a book called *You Have Seen Their Faces*. Like this book it was a book compiled almost entirely of pictures. By these pictures you saw not only the faces of the old, on whom experience and poverty had stamped wrinkles that seemed to have been put there by white-hot wires, and the faces of children wondering what sort of world they were being born into. You saw a section of the unwritten social history of the American continent. It was a history that might have taken, if complete, a million words to write. But it was unforgettably stamped on the mind, with all its implications, by a score or two of pictures.

Some day there will be, I suppose, an official history of the R.A.F., written perhaps in a million words. Meanwhile, in these pictures, there is recorded, with a quality I think that words will probably never achieve, some of the

history of two summers. And what I find remarkable about this book is also, as in the American book, the faces. For the faces—the faces of pilots, of squadron leaders, of rear-gunners, of observers, of wireless operators, of commodores—were the things that could not be seen. Watching the battles, you saw almost everything else ; the Spitfires roaring to attack, the dog-fights, the fighters turning in the sun like seagulls above the slow black geese of bombers, the parachutes flowering in the summer sky, the red-hot morse of tracer bullets breaking the twilight. You could even see Mr. Paul Nash's *Bomber in the Wood* and perhaps you ran with the kids across fields to see the same artist's *Bomber in the Corn*. But what you could not see, and what I for one wondered most about, were the faces of the men who were fighting.

In war there is a great deal of inevitable talk about heroism. Against this it is always discovered, rather surprisingly, that heroes have nothing to say. Now and then we have heard the men of the R.A.F. talking. Speaking as if embarrassed, often as if bored, often as if they had never advanced beyond a monosyllabic vocabulary, they described epics. A few of them wrote ; and one wrote, as if in partial explanation of what seemed to be this nonchalance in speech, of " the calm confidence born in the conquest of fear and in the consciousness of absolute mastery that has been developed in the matrix of experience." It is this quality that words, which can become as blunted by experience as by the lack of it, will perhaps never adequately express but which good portraiture can and does. Some hint of that quality can at least be seen in all of the Kennington portraits here—" the calm confidence born in the conquest of fear."

Are they the faces we expected to see ? It is an ironical thing that ugly circumstances, evil, cynical, bloody circumstances, often produce in men exactly opposite qualities. So killing by bomb and tracer-bullet has produced in these faces none of the indicator lines that violence and killing produce in men who behave violently for different purposes. Kennington, whose pastels have remarkably penetrative strength, finds in the face of Flight-Lieut. Mungo Park the aristocracy of a diplomat ; in the face of Sergt.—now Flight-Lieut.—J. H. Lacey, with his Mickey Mouse embroidery on his leather jacket—something of a stoical but embarrassed humorist, as befits a man who has been shot down eight

times. And if you wish to find evidence that this is a war of beliefs among people rather than differences between peoples it is here also among the faces. There are English faces here of unmistakable Teutonic line ; there are Polish faces here that seem to be quietly alive with English humour. All have a common quality that is hard, perhaps impossible, to define. A touch of sadness, a certain confidence coming near to arrogance, " fear, fatigue, and exaltation combine, perhaps, to produce a friction sufficient to burn away the clutter of inessential things."

Whether you saw the battles of the summers or not, then, here are some of the faces of the men who fought them. These faces are the most remarkable part, but not all, of this book. The story before, after and behind the fights is also here : the Nazi bombers crashed in corn and woodland, the Whitley bombers sunning, the parachutes airing, the Spitfires diving to attack, the neat, almost micrometrically exact lines of planes assembling in workshops, the aerodrome peopled by black marionettes under white-hot sun, the night fighters preparing at dusk, the Hurricane under its canvas shelter looking like a silent roundabout covered over during daytime at any country fair. All these pictures are part of a larger picture not yet complete. All are more expressive, less obvious and less tedious than words.

Among the people of the R.A.F. there is, I believe, a tradition of anonymity. They do not paint their own pictures ; their words are unsigned. This modesty sometimes compels other people to be exceptionally eulogistic about them, with the result that they hate comment on themselves. Their motto is understatement ; their commonest characteristic, perhaps, self-effacement. In this book they are depicted by other people, not fulsomely, with helpings of newspaper jam or festooned with abstract qualities ; not as heroes but as men who have done, are doing and will continue to do, a job. For this reason the R.A.F. itself will, I think, like this book, and for this reason I like it myself. For this reason also I hope—and think—it will appeal to the public, who have already seen the planes, the battles, the sky-patterns, the parachutes, the bombs, the falling and fallen enemies, and who now can say, also, " We have seen their faces."

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