

Secondary Strengths

The Day of the Tortoise. By H. E. BATES. *Joseph*. 7s. 6d.

The Clydesiders. By HUGH MONRO. *Macdonald*. 16s.

Night. By FRANCIS POLLINI. *Calder*. 20s.

A Bohemian Affair. By RAY MATHEW. *Angus & Robertson*. 15s.

The Prisoner of Mother England. By DOUGLAS HAYES. *Abelard-Schuman*. 15s.

It's easy for critics to ignore the difficulties of professional writers. They are forced at times to live off the hump; they have to rely on their secondary talents, they can't avoid exploiting a trick that has paid off — all in the interests of bread, rent or licences. The question is how much can they take the mickey out of the Muse and still be allowed to serve her? Some — Robert Graves must be the most remarkable — are rather better than the rest at not letting the one thing interfere with the other. But what about H. E. Bates, who had a talent for the rural scene and for country feelings?

In *The Day of the Tortoise* we have him in his serious, non-Larkin mood. There is a welcome absence of the susurrus of synthetic fecundity. It is a long short story about Fred, the ungrumbling slave brother to three weird sisters, and Fred's moment of liberty which he achieves by giving shelter to a gay and pregnant young woman from the local dairy. She, undoubtedly, represents the life principle. In fact everybody in the story represents a principle, I suppose, Flossie and Aggie and Ellen, the sisters, as well as Francis the jackdaw and

Joey the budgie: as characters they are all equally shadowy and formal. Mr Bates, in a curious way, sets these gaseous presences in a narrative choked with detail. Objects like custard, carpet slippers, yesterday's newspaper, pork pies and pink china candle-holders lie around all over the place, and very little sense or shape is made of them. On the basis of *The Day of the Tortoise* it seems that Mr Bates has cocked a snook at the gods once too often.

The merit of *The Clydesiders* lies less in art than authenticity. It is a plain masculine tale of working-class family life in a Glasgow slum in the Thirties, and conveys with unmistakable conviction the special quality of feeling of the time, a blend of anger, hopelessness, scepticism and respectability. The author keeps modestly out of the way, and relies for his effects on his eye for the hideous Presbyterian scene — stone tenements, cavernous cooking ranges, trams and cobbles — and on his ear for the crunching Glasgow dialect. At the same time he notes with lens-like accuracy the influence of the age of rickets and the dole within the family — the collapse of the father's character as he comes to be accepted as a permanent fireside ornament, and the stunting of mind and warping of feeling among the whey-faced children. Altogether *The Clydesiders* is a decent, honest book.

Some of Mr Munro's objectivity and control would have been welcome in *Night*, which its publishers claim was hailed as a masterpiece on its appearance in France. I can't imagine why. Its subject is an important and timely one, the brainwashing of American troops in Korea. But in his effort to make us feel the bonelessness of the Americans and the cunning ferocity of the Chinese, Mr Pollini works himself too often into a frenzy, flexing every muscle and screaming every note. The final effect is not half as devastating as that cool account of the stuffing of the hollow men that appeared in the pages of *The New Yorker*. No amount of thematic interest can atone for quite such a fatal deficiency of treatment.

Ray Mathew is a young Australian writer whose volume of short stories, *A Bohemian Affair*, is published with the help of the Commonwealth Literary Fund. He writes in a limpid, easy way which disguises — not always completely — a conscious art. The least interesting stories have to do with a dim bunch of metropolitan beatniks. The best are about country people and the young. In these he shows a nice skill in managing a syntax of simple feelings, and makes effective play with the contrast between the ardour of the young and the fatigue of the old, the one fascinated, the other defeated by the harshness of outback Australia. There are signs in this pleasant production of a fresh and original talent.

In *The Prisoner of Mother England* Douglas Hayes shows a distinctive comic gift. The hero, Christmas Grubb, is almost a conventional one by now — randy but innocent at heart, fortyish, bibulous, literary. But he has a clutch of personal ties — Middlesex cricket, cheese and chess — a job as a writer of boys' stories and a dead-pan self-ridiculing habit which give him an identity of his own. Grubb's adventures here and in Australia balance the two countries against each other, composing a kind of ribald test match between Lords and the Hill at Sydney in which, as in life, the Australian bowling is finally too much for the 'Pommie bastards'. Mr Hayes's jokes are mordant, affectionate and funny, his book an acceptable gamey morsel.

WILLIAM WALSH

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