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Sean O'Faolain, who may prove to be the most gifted of Irish short-story writers

The Short Story returns to Life



A. E. Coppard. He holds the foremost position among living short-story writers



H. A. Manhood, who holds an honoured place in the list of contemporary short-story writers



Liam O'Flaherty—wild, lusty, bitter, lyrical

I HINTED last week at the probability of a revival in the short story, and it may be worth while to indicate some names which have made that revival possible, at least in England.

There was never a time in English literature when this delicate and difficult prose-form was so widely practised or received with so much favour. Not that the short story is a modern invention, or that it is as popular as the novel of crime, or that every second contemporary author one calls to mind is a Maupassant or a Boccaccio. Nevertheless, the short story has come out of its obscurity, reanimated, by a little army of champions whose work it will pay the student of present-day literature to examine.

Who are these writers? Since the death of Katherine Mansfield, Mr. A. E. Coppard has certainly held the foremost position among living short-story writers. Coppard has been compared with the Elizabethans, and with the early Dutch painters.

The comparison with the Dutch painters seems to me exceedingly apt; his work, like theirs, is fresh, robust, whimsical, yet full of poetry and delicacy; it abounds in humour and irony; it has a realism that mingled a lyricism that may well recall Vermeer.

His figures are drawn vividly, unflinchingly, and unforgettably. His faults are a tendency towards a kind of mawkish humour and heavy fantasy, and both have repeatedly undone him. He inclines also to exploit symbolism to an irritating degree, and his "Silver Circus" showed only too well the disastrous results he can then achieve.

But to read "The Field of Mustard," "The Higgler," "Fine Feathers," "The Presser," and "Polly Morgan" is to taste something strong, rich, and memorable. A taste of Coppard is indeed as good as the taste of some old flower-wine distilled by one of those countrymen one so often meets in his pages, but now alas! very rarely out of them.

The mention of A. E. Coppard at once induces thought of the Irish, for Coppard was once attracted by the Irish idiom, and one might almost make a variation in Shaw's famous pronouncement and say that all the greatest English short-story writers are Irishmen. Moreover, it is an Irishman, Mr. E. J. O'Brien, who, by his yearly collection of stories, has done so much to keep alive the interest of both the public and the writer in the short story.

Among Irish writers Liam O'Flaherty comes instantly to mind: wild, lusty, bitter, lyrical, bursting alternately with cries of savagery and whispers of the most perfect Irish wistfulness. His tales and little sketches of Irish peasant life, having a finish and

By H. E. Bates

delicacy which is not always so evident in his novels, must rank very high indeed in the history of the modern short story. His stories of animals are most fresh and lovely.

Lately a story from O'Flaherty has been a rare event, and he seems likely to lose his place as the foremost living Irish short-story writer to one of two younger writers, Sean O'Faolain and Frank O'Connor, both of whom have made their names with a single volume of stories, "Midsummer Night Madness" and "Guests of the Nation." These two volumes, one richly imaginative and lyrical, the other more realistic, must be read, so to speak, side by side; they deal with the same events and scenes of the civil war in Ireland, events and scenes which, in fact, their authors often shared together.

Next to the Irishmen come the women, for whom the short-story has had a peculiarly strong attraction. Two or three years ago Miss Norah Hoult wrote in "Poor Women!" five such extraordinary stories that she was acclaimed as instantly and enthusiastically as Miss Pauline Smith had been acclaimed for her story "The Pain," which subsequently appeared in her first and so far her only volume of stories, "The Little Karoo," a collection of tragic and poignant studies of life in South Africa. "The Pain," in its compassionate tenderness and understanding of two aged peasants, is unforgettable, painful indeed in the depth of its truth and humanity. Unfortunately, a story by Pauline Smith is also now a rare event.

Miss Dorothy Edwards also, I think, writes too little. Her art in its essentials recalls the art of Turgeniev. Pure and simple in form, her stories have a half-ironical, half-old-fashioned flavour

which it is difficult to define, and against the work of Mrs. Malachi Whitaker the stories in "Rhapsody" seem like a soft, gentle, southern landscape against the bleak industrialised areas of Yorkshire. "Frost in April" contains, like her subsequent volumes of stories, no trace of preciousness or exclusiveness. Mrs. Whitaker writes with a kind of casual vigour and simplicity and her stories are full of the subtlest as well as the tenderest feeling.

And the list might go on: H. A. Manhood, Rhys Davies, L. A. G. Strong, T. F. Powys, James Joyce, to be strongly supplemented by that increasing band of enthusiasts in America, where the signs of revival are perhaps more refreshing and vigorous even than here.

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