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A Novel of the Week

By H. E. BATES

Furrows in Suffolk

FATHERS OF THEIR PEOPLE. By H. W. FREEMAN. Chatto and Windus. 7s. 6d.

IT is curious that novels of the soil, in England at any rate, are so rare. But the demand for them, as one sees by the success of Hardy, Miss Kaye Smith, Mrs. Constance Holme and of Mr. Freeman himself, is surely as large as for any other type of novel; and agriculture, even in these days, seems hardly a dead subject, or is it really true that the land and the people of which Mr. Freeman writes so admirably are dying and vanishing things? Has the golden age of the land passed? I notice that Mr. Freeman writes of the land of thirty or forty years ago and that his story breaks off suddenly, as though blighted, at the declaration of war. Has the blood of his Suffolk people thinned since then?

I have myself a profound belief in the land and I fancy Mr. Freeman has too, for he writes of it intensely and lovingly, with detachment and yet with a steadfast understanding. One might almost believe that he is a Geaiter or a Brundish himself; his writing has just the same honest, imperishable substance; his words are as broad and slow; the texture of his whole novel is as rich and enduring. As a writer he has no fine tricks, he has no axe to grind, he never asserts himself. If his characters get drunk or whore or deceive or quarrel it is no fault of his. "It is my duty," wrote Tchekov once, "to show people as they are, not as I think they ought to be." Mr. Freeman takes the same admirable attitude.

In *Fathers of their People* he is concerned with an old Suffolk farming family, the Brundishes of Pond Hall, who have farmed and increased their land for centuries. Old Izaak Brundish, the father of Adam and the grandfather of Dick, was the father of his people with a vengeance, for every village had one at least of his bastards, but Adam, his son, is quieter, though he too can drink three pints before and three after his breakfast and plough a perfect furrow. In Dick, his only son, the old Brundish fire leaps up again, and Dick philanders as widely and wildly as Izaak, but without his tangible results. When Dick wants to marry the daughter of a molecatcher whom Adam dislikes, father and son quarrel and Dick leaves the farm. But it is a common characteristic of all Mr. Freeman's people that they never leave the land for long; his Geaiters one by one tried to break away from it but were drawn back as though by a powerful magnet. Dick Brundish also returns. And when at the end of the book one finds him enlisting in the yeomanry one is certain that, if he survives, he will return again and that his children and his grandchildren will find themselves bound to the land just as inescapably. Mr. Freeman's instinct and knowledge here are absolutely right; the land is something like a Jesuit to its people; it leaves an irradicable and unmistakable mark upon them. The effect of seed-time and harvest, ploughing and harrowing, rain and sun, frost and storm, strikes deeper than the skin.

I feel that Mr. Freeman is just as securely bound to the soil and I hope that if he leaves it he will return quickly, as Dick Brundish and the Geaiters do. He knows the land as perhaps no other writer of to-day knows it; he transmits the very smell of it to his pages. My only grievance against him is that his novel is only half a novel. It reads as though only half-finished. The Brundishes deserve another book.**** H. E. BATES

Other Novels of the Week

BROKEN HOUSE. By Ambrose South. Grayson. 7s. 6d. A small farmer's family and their struggle to live, described mainly from the point of view of the wife. Heartrending, but so full of human understanding and displaying in its characters so much courage that we rank it as one of the most original novels of the year.****

SONS OF SINGERMANN. By Myrom Brinig. Cobden-Sanderson. 7s. 6d. The six sons and one daughter of the Roumanian Jew, of whose early life we have already heard, are here brought together in the Far West town that is their home, in the year 1931. A large scale novel the theme of which is elemental human nature that has no firm foothold in America. A rich and powerful book that presents a significant aspect of American civilization.****

THE IRISH VOLUNTEER. By Francis Carty. Dent. 7s. 6d. A story of a boy in an Irish town who grows up during the War, joins the Republican Army, and becomes the organizer of a "flying column." Unlike most Irish novels of the period, this has no bitterness. It is frank and outspoken, and takes the standpoint of the rebels, but its serenity and good humour make it delightful reading.***

INHERITANCE. By Phyllis Bentley. Gollancz. 8s. 6d. Family history. This time in Yorkshire. A murder included. True to life. Aims at greatness, which is not reached. Good for its ample detail.***

THE FRENCH HUSBAND. By Kathleen Coyle. Pharos. 7s. 6d. A smart American girl marries into the French aristocracy. While on holiday in Yugoslavia, she is called back to America to her dying father, leaving her husband with a handsome girl in the same hotel. A skilful, sophisticated, amusing story, without one wasted word in it.***

ALTHOUGH. By Lord Gorell. Murray. 7s. 6d. After a heavy and uncertain beginning, this story of how a primitive-souled young Scot loves the daughter of his father's worst enemy sweeps along in fine dramatic style to a happy ending. The fierce struggle between love and hate and the final triumph of love are well described.***

OVER THE BORDER. By Victor Keen. Translated from the Russian by Natalie Duddington. Mathews and Marrot. 7s. 6d. Wonderfully vivid, humorous, and moving story of two Communist boys sent on a dangerous mission to the last stronghold of the Whites in the Far East in 1921. Horribly grim ending.***

To enable readers to judge the merits of novels at a glance, we add stars to these short notices. Five stars denotes a masterpiece, four stars a novel of outstanding quality, and so down to one star.