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REPUTATIONS

BACKGROUND WITH CHORUS. By Frank Swinnerton.
(Hutchinson. 18s.)

By H. E. BATES

BOOKS of reminiscences by elderly authors are sometimes inclined to be like dark damp pantries, where mould grows on the bread and cheese of yesterday and flies blow with evil on the cold joints of dead reputations. The temptation is to do no more than peer hastily in, sniff briefly at odours of dankness and then retreat, leaving untouched the limp, dubious scraps of half-forgotten salad days. Too many names, too many figures, too much gossip; endless minuscule talents packed like sardines; too many old broken biscuits, too many left-overs, too many scraps of those tasteless half-baked odd fish, the uncreative talkers, the old pretenders.

Mr. Swinnerton's book, though it does occasionally give too much pantry room to too many sardines, is not of this kind, and for several reasons. He has a well-tempered personality, acute but neither acid nor ungracious; he is sharp of perception, urbane in judgment, but never smug; he is trenchantly retentive of memory; above all he is able to smile with sage wit at himself, his long store of recollections and his world. This world is a large one, not merely in the multitude of figures it embraces, but in the time through which it stretches back. At fifty I cannot begin to touch the fringes of the days when Kipling had just fallen like a tin god; when Mr. Swinnerton, "being a Londoner and incapable of reverence," first caught sight of the swarthy figure of Clement Shorter crossing Fleet Street; and "*when even young first novelists could count upon receiving fifty or sixty notices of some kind in the London and provincial Press, while space for their seniors was unlimited.*" Incredible advance of culture!—*italics mine.*

Mr. Swinnerton's feat of memory in capturing so much of the detail of this world, and much of that for the succeeding fifty years, is so remarkable that you might be excused for thinking he had never been a novelist himself but only and always an ardent caricaturist, furiously busy, working in lightning pencil, hoard-

ing up in some scrupulously indexed atelier a million sketches. I suppose every literary personage of any importance for the past sixty years or so is displayed here and I suppose the temptation for the general reader will be to see what Swinnerton has to say of the more famous, elevated talents: the Wellses, Bennetts, Galsworthys, Shaws, Bellocs and so on. Admirable though these are and sometimes excellent, as in the case of Belloc, I find, for my part, far greater relish in the lesser portraits: Clement Shorter, Robertson Nicoll (a Scot who said of Shorter, "He's a blunderer; he's a fool; he's a mass of astonishing ignorance. But he's the only friend I have"); John Churton Collins (whom Tennyson splendidly damned by saying that he was "a louse on the locks of literature"); W. P. Ker (another Scot who, on being informed that William Sharp alias Fiona Macleod, dressed himself in women's clothes before writing each book under that female pseudonym, remarked, "Did he? The bitch!"); and a whole company of others, pithily, pepperily presented.

The parsimonious J. M. Dent is a shining light among them, reminding me so much of that German publisher who throughout his career never paid anybody—purely on the principle that "it's paying people that makes it so expensive!"

Swinnerton's capacity for sage and pungent comment shows no sign of diminishing, in fact, I think, rather the reverse, as he comes down to within reach of today. Of Katherine Mansfield ("I find her work invariably shallow"), he recalls the remark of a woman contemporary that her face was decadent; though admiring Henry James, he chronicles the reaction of a friend who exploded into exceedingly violent distaste of James remarking, "Oh! he was horrible! He was rather like a formal suet pudding. . . . He was like a rat!" And when it comes to D. H. Lawrence, a man who, like Bennett, had the northern provincial's readiness to give unsought advice, "a trait no Londoner can bear," he coolly cuts him to pieces.