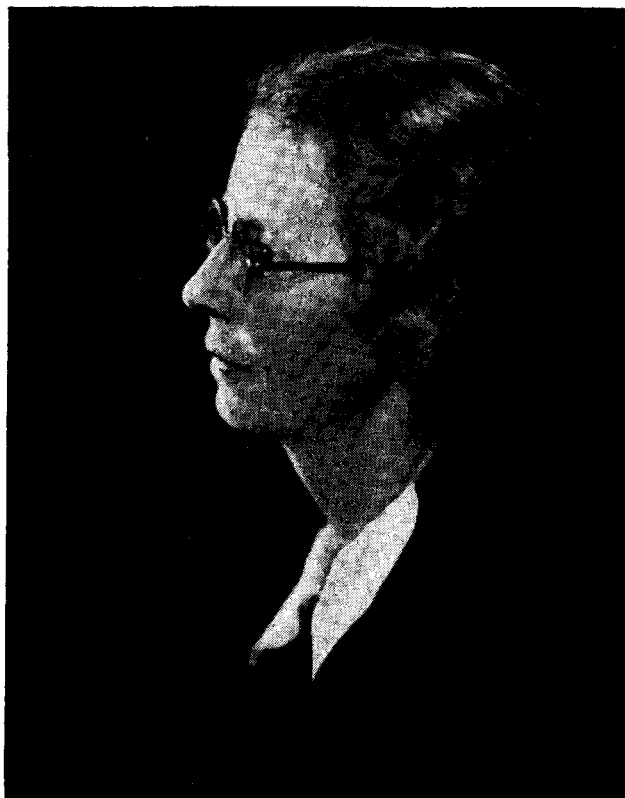


# Is the British Novel Dead?

BY PHYLLIS BENTLEY

IN a recent article in this journal Mr. John Strachey spoke of the "general decay of English imaginative letters," and contended that the excellence of the contemporary English detective novel merely served to emphasize the "extent and devastating character" of this decay. That statement seems to me almost ludicrous in its inaccuracy, and I propose to combat it by citing here a few of the "rising" young novelists of the actual present moment. I am not going to speak of the fiction of Strong, Bates (H. E. and R.), Gerhardt, Linklater, Brophy, Aldington, Graves, Rose Macaulay, Storm Jameson, Winifred Holtby, and other writers whose reputation is already safely established, though I should find it easy enough to defeat Mr. Strachey if I brought up such a battery; I am not going to discuss the great pioneer work of Virginia Woolf and Aldous Huxley; I shall cite just ten of the many young writers who within the last few years alone have entered literature and made new contributions to fiction, with the idea of showing that English fiction is by no means decayed, but on the contrary robustly alive and kicking.

First let me postulate that "British" fiction—a description never used in Great Britain, where we speak of English and American fiction respectively; but I recognize the ambiguity this mode owes to our common tongue—British fiction, then, has certain essential differences from American fiction, and will I think always retain those differences, for they arise out of a difference in our national life. It is a fundamental difference, for it springs from a difference in the physical geography of our respective countries, the difference in climate and size. The tempo of English life, lived in our foggy and nook-shotten isle, is very much slower than the tempo of American life, lived in this sparkling electric air. Again, the surface range of American life is infinitely greater than English life; the enterprising young American has some three million square miles of his own nation at his disposal, and consequently can roam restlessly from city to city, job to job,



Phyllis Bentley

Elliott & Fry

experience to experience; in England there simply is not room for such agreeable cavortings, the Englishman has either to go to the colonies or stay at home. Consequently, English life tends to be intensive and single where American life tends to be extensive and multiple; and the English novel tends to present a few incidents deeply where the American novel tends to present life through a shrewd observation of many events. Again, the average American is far more articulate than the average Englishman—I see I have slipped out of "British" again; I'm afraid I cannot break myself of the other habit. I have no data on which to institute a comparison of the size of the respective vocabularies of American and Englishman, but a considerable observation has taught me that the American uses his vocabulary more frequently than the Englishman; he uses more words more often—the Englishman expresses much, or means to express much, by the mere tone of the voice, in his fewer words.

I apologize for restating what are probably commonplaces to *Saturday Review* readers, but I feel I must indicate why,

in my view, the quick-firing, wise-cracking, wide-ranging American novel never can and never will spring from English soil; because I wish further to make it clear that the absence of these quick-firing, wise-cracking, wide-ranging novels in England is not in the least an indication of decay, of lack of vitality in the English novel. A literature must not falsify its material; it must remain true to the national life in manner no less than matter, if it is to hope to share the national genius. Accordingly the strength of the native English novel still lies in its depth and intensity, its close-knit texture, while the strength of the American novel lies in qualities almost precisely the reverse.

The work of the most distinguished writer on my list must be viewed in this light. Miss Elizabeth Bowen's short stories and novels are, speaking superficially, limited in range; they deal with persons belonging chiefly to one class, the upper middle-class intelligentsia, and not by any means with even all the activities of these persons, for they are invariably shown in their private capacities. Her novels have not, that is to say, any obvious political, industrial, historical, or economic implications. But as regards human emotion they are both deep and wide; there is a poignancy, an intensity in Miss Bowen's presentation of experience which I believe we rightly rank very high; the texture of her fiction is not merely closely, but subtly, woven. Her latest novel, "The Death of the Heart," has a subject which, if timidly or conventionally treated, might well give us a pretty little story of the feeblest and most sentimental kind, for it concerns the spoiling of a young girl's first love affair by the sister-in-law in

Next  Week

A PECULIAR TREASURE

By EDNA FERBER

Reviewed by Margaret Culklin Banning

INSIDE GERMANY

By ALBERT GRZESINSKI

Reviewed by Henry C. Wolfe



E. C. Large "is developing the line opened by Aldous Huxley, and putting science into fiction" . . .

whose house she is making a temporary, reluctant stay. But this novel is in fact an intensive piece of high tragedy. "The highest tragedy," Thomas Hardy has observed, "is that of the worthy encompassed by the inevitable. . . ." Here the young heroine, a girl in her teens, is supremely "worthy"; she is innocence and truth and love itself, she symbolizes all that is good and beautiful in life. She loves—a worthless sophisticate who is already deep in an intrigue with the wife of her brother; this older, more experienced woman, who should have cherished the young life in her care, basely betrays her trust by the small mean act of reading the child's diary. As we read, we feel that profound and universal tragedy, the world's slow, snickering betrayal of all that is good and fair.

And where, by the way, is the true American tragedy? In the American literature I find admirable comedy, romance, chronicle, satire, but as yet no real tragedy in the Sophoclean and Hardyan sense of the word. Dreiser's "An American Tragedy" is an excellent social study, but not a tragedy—the poor, weak hero never reaches tragic heights. Dos Passos's Charlie has a pitiable but not, I think, a tragic fall, for, again, he does not fall far enough; he was never "worthy." Perhaps tragedy does not yet flourish on the soil of this vast country, with its almost limitless possibilities, because as yet no doom is inevitable here? I do not know; I leave the (very interesting) question to those with a greater knowledge of American life and literature than I can claim.

The writer of greatest magnanimity, in the Latin sense of that word, to appear recently in English fiction is Mr. R. C. Hutchinson, whose latest work, "Testament," is undoubtedly the outstanding English novel of 1938. This novel, with Mr. Hutchinson's earlier work, has been

widely read in the United States, so I need say little of it here, except that it has both external range and emotional intensity. Its pictures of Russians in war and revolution are superb; sombre, lurid, and pulsating, quite in the Dostoevsky style. You will observe that I say pictures of Russians, not of Russia; a picture of Russia does indeed emerge, but only through the mentalities of the characters. The final "testament" of the hero, who has held unswervingly to the cause of liberty and humanity throughout, and has accordingly suffered at the hands of each political party in turn, is truly memorable, and also completely topical. Altogether, "Testament" is a novel in the grand style, and we may look with the utmost hopefulness to Mr. Hutchinson's future work.

The difference between the tempo of American and English life, reflected in their respective literatures, is again neatly illustrated by the work of another young English writer whose work has quality, Mr. Graham Greene. Mr. Greene began his fiction with a multiplicity novel of a familiar type, "Stamboul Train," which yet stood out from the ruck of such novels by the intensity of its characterization. His two later novels, "A Gun for Sale" and "Brighton Rock," belong to the category of gangster fiction. In the first, a man of the underworld is hired to commit a political murder, commits it, and flees from the pursuing law; while thus "on the run," he is saved from justice by a girl, who attaches herself to him but finally betrays him. How often do we not see this story, swift, quick-firing, full of men with bulging hip-pockets, on a Hollywood film! But in "A Gun for Sale" no machine guns rattle, no G-men step in; the theme of the novel is not whether the murderer will escape or not, it is the moral problem of the girl's attitude to him. Can he trust her? He feels he can, and safely does so, but presently makes a further revelation of his character. Will that shock her into the betrayal for which the reader longs? It is a psychological, not a physical, problem.

"Brighton Rock" deals similarly with the gangster underworld. A gang, operating in that gaudy seaside resort of Brighton, revenges the murder of their leader by frightening a petty journalist to death. By chance two women can break the alibi carefully established for the gang by their new leader, a pathological lad still in his teens. The younger woman loves the boy; he exploits this affection, which he loathes, by marrying her to keep her out of the witness-box. As in the previous novel, the theme of "Brighton Rock" is not the safety of the main character, but the psychological problem of his reactions to his situation. Mr. Greene seems able to investigate these sinister psychologies without sentiment-

talizing them; his prose has tension, but is never overwritten.

A younger writer on whom I am keeping a hopeful and expectant eye is Mr. E. C. Large, who is developing the line opened by Aldous Huxley, and putting science into fiction. His novel "Sugar from the Air" was just what a young man's first novel should be; that is to say, it attacked existing abuses in a rollicking satire which was never bitter but always penetrating. The story of the young scientist's search for a method of extracting sugar from the air, his attempts to market it, his clash with big business, and his ultimate ejection from all participation in his own process, is full of authentic detail both scientific and commercial, and highly entertaining as well. His second novel is less successful—but then most second novels are less successful than their predecessors, for in the second novel the writer has to become a novelist, find a method, construct, invent, create, instead of just writing blithely as the fancy, or more often the memory, took him in his first work. It is the third novel, when the novelist should have found his feet and learned his craft, to which the critic directs an anxious eye. Mr. Large's second novel is really two novels, each of which could have been better if written separately. One of the novels is about a young novelist who is writing a novel; his struggles to write, his difficulties with money, his wife, and the outside world, the novel's ultimate acceptance by a book club, and the lionizing of the author, form the framework to the novel he is writing, extracts from which are given at considerable length. This inner novel, an entertaining satire on the exploitation of a drug, something like the Soma drug in Huxley's "Brave New World," which gives its takers not only sleep but highly agreeable dreams, is sufficiently vivacious,

(Continued on page 14)



Oxford Studio

Gwyn Jones: "a sombre but powerful talent which has recently made some mark" . . .



# Looking at Trouble

*DAYS OF OUR YEARS.* By Pierre van Paassen. New York: Hillman-Curl. 1939. \$3.50.

Reviewed by EUGENE LYONS

**T**HIS book by the former roving correspondent of the *New York World* will be thoughtlessly tagged as another autobiography of another newspaper man. That tag, however, will cover only a small portion of the book's area and will not even suggest its significance. While there is newspapering galore in its 500 crowded pages, and adventure and crucial world events in close-up, the volume adds up to the history of a robust human spirit. Exposed to the life of our epoch at its most brutal depths—international and internal wars, sadistic dictatorships, squalid and exploited colonies in Asia and Africa—that spirit lost none of its native vitality.

A record of intense action and uncompromising thought, "Days of Our Years" never descends to the merely smart or merely shocking. It is pervaded by compassion and a certain moral cleanliness that take it out of the run of newspaper men's memoirs. Two things, above all, set it off from the more typical now-it-can-be-told reporter's book. First and most obvious, its superb writing—only Vincent Sheean's prose, among books in this category, approaches van Paassen's. Second and more important, a quality which I can only describe as spirituality. In the larger sense of the word, the author is religious. He is aware of the actual or potential dignity of life, its flashes of beauty—an awareness that shines through even the most sordid and disheartening events described in these pages.

Lest this frighten off anyone contemptuous or scared of the deeper implications of mortal existence, I hasten to add that as sheer narrative "Days of Our Years" will hold even the most frost-bitten pessimists. Mr. van Paassen fought in the World War and covered every major blood-letting of the next two decades, including those in Ethiopia, Spain, and Palestine. Enjoying the blessed advantages of an unrestricted roving assignment, so envied by correspondents tied to specific posts, he was able to witness nearly all the dramatic events of these our years; to interview nearly every statesman, warrior, and maniacal messiah worth interviewing. Of all these matters, and many besides, he writes vividly and with an intelligence that lights up obscure corners.

Born and raised in the rigorous Calvinism of a small Dutch town, but brushed even then by the wings of liberalism, the author ripened into a skeptical—but not cynical—modernist. His liberalism is not narrow and partisan. From Holland he moved, with his family, to Canada, where

he prepared for the ministry and actually attained the status of assistant pastor—among the *Hernhutters* and *Dukhobors* of Alberta, of all places. Then the war and its aftermath diverted him, almost by accident, into American journalism.

Evidently he was not too happy under the restrictions of routine American reporting, despite his wider latitude. "When I could not cry out in print against the events I saw, my blood boiled, and sometimes I would pitch in physically . . . I always forgot that my role was confined to that of a neutral observer of trouble." Ultimately he got himself expelled or barred from practically every country in Europe—including the France that he loved deeply, until the advent of Léon Blum made him more acceptable.

Dozens of amazing tales stud the record, some of them purely personal, others intimately related to world affairs. His dramatic reconstruction of the legend (which he wishes were true but cannot confirm) that Pope Benedict XV appeared in the Champagne trenches and walked into no man's land pleading for peace. His account of the true facts of the siege of Alcázar. His extraordinary interview with Marshal Luyatey, wherein the colonial militarist blamed Pontius Pilate for not having disposed of that rabble-rouser Jesus Christ more expeditiously. His experience with a *Poltergeist*, or ghost or emanation, that haunted his own home outside Paris. I could fill pages merely listing the exciting episodes of Mr. van Paassen's career.

The author's interest and, in the end, passionate personal involvement in the fate of the Jewish race is among the most unusual stories in recent autobiography. The orthodox Calvinists among whom he spent his youth lived by the Old Testament and felt themselves, in a sense, the heritors of Israel. Again and again in his journalistic career he came up against the tragedy, and the sublimity, of the Jew in his modern ordeal of persecution. When his assignments finally took him to Palestine and the Near East, his growing preoccupation with the problem came to a focus. "If Palestine is the Jews' national home, it is my spiritual home," he writes, and readers, having followed the evolution of the author's mind, will not doubt the statement. In the last few years, the reviewer understands, Mr. van Paassen has devoted much time to the Zionist cause. His estimate of the Palestine situation today is significantly close to that offered by William B. Ziff recently in "The Rape of Palestine."

No review can do this rich, well-written book full justice. I recommend it highly.

*Eugene Lyons, author of "Assignment in Utopia," has recently become editor of The American Mercury.*



Matthew Arnold

## Arnold's Influence

*MATTHEW ARNOLD.* By Lionel Trilling. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1939. \$3.50.

Reviewed by JAMES ORRICK

**A**RNOLD was the most influential critic of his age; the estimate must be as unequivocal as this," writes Mr. Trilling. The fact that his influence on the present age is not greater proceeds largely from the over-emphasis placed on certain aspects of his doctrine (the word comes naturally in connection with him) in academic circles. Mr. Trilling speaks of the "frank and simple dualism which made Arnold in part congenial to the Humanism of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More." What he elsewhere calls "Arnold's subtle critical dialectic" has provided a refuge for the type of mind which wishes to make the best of two worlds. On the other hand, Arnold is easy game for the clever writers (some of them actually Victorian themselves) who specialize in the entertaining exposure of Victorian inconsistency.

In a really notable book designed "to show the thought of Matthew Arnold in its complex unity and to relate it to the historical and intellectual events of his time," Mr. Trilling takes Matthew Arnold seriously without being pious about him. The importance of the book is that it is a comprehensive study of the whole man. For Matthew Arnold was not primarily a literary critic; the clue to his enigma is that he was really a social critic.

"The secretary of old Lord Lansdowne, the Liberal peer, was a singularly handsome young man whose manners were Olympian and whose waistcoats were remarkable. He was most ironic; his very serious university friends were often annoyed with him because he laughed too much." The prevailing sadness of his first volume of verse seemed to his friends an astonishing contradiction; but it was the first step in the unfolding of the true Matthew Arnold.

In a remarkable and absorbing chapter,