

Fiction. Two books reviewed this week are as opposite, in purpose and style, as any that could be conceived, though they are products of our day, and both are collections of short stories. Jean-Paul Sartre's "The Wall and Other Stories" presents his now familiar nihilistic conception of a society which shelters the human rats that gnaw at its foundations, the vicious criminals, neurotics, and degenerates on whom are based that strange philosophy known as existentialism. At the opposite pole is "The Lion-Tamer," as obviously the product of Ireland as the other is of France. Bryan MacMahon's stories are taken from a seaside village in Kerry, where the rhythms of the old established ways of a peasantry that lives by the land and the sea are still unshaken by the political ideologies that are shattering the rest of the world. This book is a wholly worthy successor to Sean O'Faolain's "The Man Who Invented Sin."

True Adams of Irish Earth

THE LION-TAMER. By Bryan MacMahon. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1949 224 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by ANN F. WOLFE

ROMANTIC Ireland may, as Yeats would have it, be dead and gone and with O'Leary in the grave. Literary Ireland is none of the three. Her poetry and drama, of less Olympian stature than in Yeats's day, are in a healthy state. Her novelists steadily feed the stream of good fiction and her short-story writers are turning out some of the best tales published in English today.

With "The Lion-Tamer" Bryan MacMahon takes immediate place in the top echelon of contemporary Ireland's short-story writers. Sean O'Faolain, Frank O'Connor, and Michael McLaverty must move over at once for the man from Kerry. The newcomer's art is perhaps more self-conscious than theirs, but his fishermen, farmers, and townsfolk—yes, and his evil old mothers-in-law—are true Adams of Irish earth. There is an exhilarating, almost intoxicating, quality to some of his landscapes and a touch of madness to a few of his denouements.

Most of the twenty-two stories in this collection are based on life in a seaside village of Kerry. Mr. MacMahon's is not the tourist's Kerry with its sentimentalized Killarney and the languorous, quasi-tropical southern shore, but a "compact, intimate huddle scooped out of Kerry rawness," undoubtedly on the harsh west coast. Some of his most beguiling characters are residents of Friary Lane, where communal life warms itself at the turf fires of the poor and lowly. Neighbors foregather of an evening to "talk over the many little happenings of the day, piling tiny incident

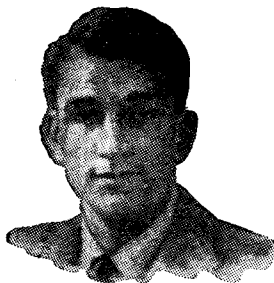
on incident until even such a commonplace thing as a man's crossing from one side of the street to the other could assume an immoderate importance."

This, indeed, is pretty much Mr. MacMahon's way of telling a story. "The End of the World" is a literal example of his method. From such insubstantial beginnings as village tedium and a newspaper clipping, the incidents mount, bolstered by color and vitality of style, and bulwarked by racial humor and the speech

rhythms of good Kerry talk, until they spire high up into the dizzy metaphysical blue. I do not soon expect to read a story that can match this for sheer play of innocent roguery.

In giving his Kerrymen their head—comely but hardly the coolest in the land—and not trying overmuch to force them into the mold of conventional fiction, Mr. MacMahon achieves uncommon range and diversity. The title piece, its name incongruous to the Irish scene, is a triumph of picaresque imaginativeness, universal and not Gaelic. "The Man Who Detested Movement" comes off rather well as a psychotic five-finger exercise. "The Good Dead in the Green Hills," noblest story in the book, distills the essence of the Irish spirit. "Chestnut and Jet" takes on brilliance from a passionate Irish sense of the magnificence of life. "The Ring" is a moving study in compassionate memory.

It is a tribute to the charm of Mr. MacMahon's style that when he falls back on an occasional little miracle for the furtherance of his plots, he not only does not outrage the reader but enlists his connivance in the literary sleight of hand. "The Clarinet" is one of the cases in point. In order to get his historic woodwind on the scene of action the author shortens to the vanishing point the canonical dis-



THE AUTHOR: On County Kerry fair days, ringing over the lakes of Killarney above the chaffer of farmers and more resonant than debate in the pubs, can be heard the rollicking lyrics of Bryan MacMahon: "Oh, Puck may be famous and Galway be grand/And the praise of Tremore echo down through the land,/But I'll sing you a ballad and beauty extol,/As I found it long 'go in the Town of Listowel." He has dozens of them, but in penny handbill form that variation of "Erin Go Bragh" was a sell-

out among the *seanchuidhes* (sounded out "sén-eh-kees" in English)—the tinkers, hawkers, and minstrels who have kept 2,000 years of Irish lore emerald. Fearing them obsolescent, Mr. MacMahon has been going from thatched cottage to thatched cottage recording their tales—along with his other callings of short-story and radio-script writer, dramatist, poet, bookseller, reviewer, and teacher. In 1947, pressed by duties as master of Listowel's National School and the demands of an active literary life, he gave up MacMahon's Bookshop, a venture which he found "pays sufficiently well to be interesting but not in such plenteous return that my cupidity conquers enthusiasm." He was born in Listowel in 1909 and apparently still likes it there. "Our wonderful back gate," he says, "opened on an exciting world"—the local marketplace. He was educated formally at the town's schools and St. Patrick's College in Dublin—informally, but practicably, among smiths, shoemakers, and saddlers, who helped sharpen in him a certain indigenous rhetoric. With the story "The Good Dead in the Green Hills" he won top honors in 1945 from *The Bell*, Irish literary monthly. It is in "The Lion-Tamer," his first book. He is now writing a novel, and a play is on the Abbey Theatre agenda. Although Frank O'Connor's praise brought his fledgling verse to public attention, he has abandoned poetry, claiming that it has been captured by charlatans. But he'd still like to master the ballad. —R. G.

Combination Chips and Socrates

THE VARSITY STORY: By Morley Callaghan. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1949. 172 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ROBERT HALSBAND

tance between coincidence and miracle. But by the time the convenient itinerant has tootled his way into the plot the reader is so deep in the saga of the owl Independent Band that he would have sanctioned the use of the Angel Gabriel, and he a brass and no E-flat clarinet at all. Anyway, as far as plot is involved, "The Clarinet" is antic hocus-pocus. A faint air of lunacy envelops the nostalgic E-flatters. Or, in deference to accuracy and the afternoon heat, it may be that the whole thing was not lunar, but a matter of Kerry sunstroke.

People, as a matter of fact, and not plots, are this author's main concern. In the convent idyll called "The Corn Was Springing" he says of two engaging old nuns: "A shot in the boundary elms would have startled them; a rat in the partition would have terrified them. But the remoter phenomena of people's emotions they perfectly understood." Because of his own understanding of these phenomena Mr. MacMahon's characters are not Irishmen first but human beings of universal appeal. He is artist enough to let them reveal themselves as much by implication as by what they do and say. This mastery of the psychological lacuna is especially effective in the portrayal of characters such as the sadistic father-in-law in "The Breadmaker" and the sly old rascal of a legal expert in "The Will."

To say that there is poetry of phrase and concept in Mr. MacMahon's writing is redundancy of a sort. Poetry comes as natural to Ireland's storytellers as song to a Neapolitan. It is the same whether the story be oral or written. The poetic in "The Lion-Tamer" is less frequently pitched in the minor key of most contemporary Irish story-telling, freer of the mystical sense of eternity.

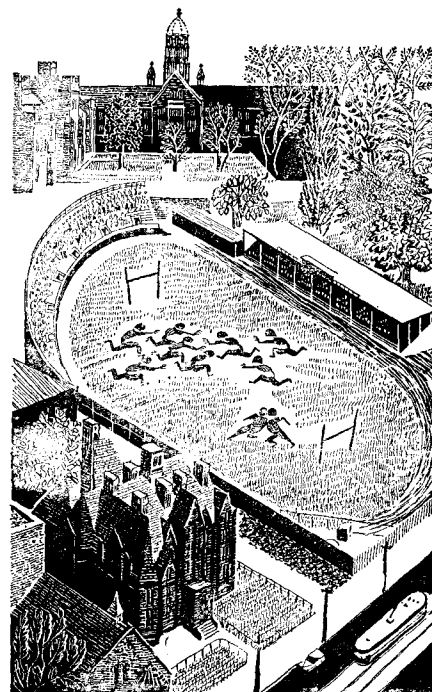
Mr. MacMahon's men and women are partial, and racially so, to the amenities of the oblique approach. When they resort to direct address, it is time to beware. There is brutal and shattering rightness to their thrust. "Black Nets" owes its voltage to the fisherman's challenge: "That'd be more your business than mine, Father." When Paddy, in "Gentlemen, This Is Armageddon!" blurts out his final remark he strikes sharp to the target of tragedy. To lift the author's own words from their context, his writing "rings with the truth of a good bell."

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THE university setting has been a fertile one in recent fiction, with a range so considerable that it extends from the humorous irony in "Zuleika Dobson" to, most recently, the protest against anti-Semitism in "The Professor's Umbrella." The more intricate problems that concern Mr. Callaghan in his novel have already been treated in non-fiction, notably in the brilliant essays of Jacques Barzun ("Teacher in America") and in the sober reports of President Conant and the Harvard Committee on General Education. Still, "The Varsity Story" cannot easily be classified. It is set in the very real, substantial University of Toronto; and its slight plot, built around characters who are primarily mouthpieces, is merely a device to explore some of the fundamental questions that American universities face. Although gentle and unobtrusive, the book is important, for the questions it raises are significant to universities on both sides of the Great Lakes.

The story tells of the intellectual quest of Arthur Tyndall, a New Zealander educated at Oxford, who has come to the university as warden of one of its houses. At the end of his first year there, he has decided to leave, for he feels that the jumble of buildings and people have no pattern, tradition, or direction. But then he begins to sense something inspiring; and his curiosity becomes an obsession, his irritation a goad, to find out what the university really means. He stays on, acting like a combination of Mr. Chips and Socrates, and finds a happy fulfillment in wrestling with the problems that have afflicted the university.

There is, to begin with, its disease of gigantism. The result, especially since the university lies in an urban center, is that it is depersonalized, with large classes in which the teacher is a lecturing performer, and the student is a number on a proctor's seating chart. Accompanying this is a dispersion or dilution of the intellectual stamina not only of the students but of the faculty, who have been debased to a position of timid subservience to the powers above—or below. What particularly worries Tyndall is that the goal of university education seems to have been forgotten. The teachers of liberal arts



—From the book.

fear that the sciences and the "practical" subjects are pushing the humanities into a dusty corner of the curriculum. What gives basis for this fear is that many students regard the university as a vocational training center, and save their enthusiasm for bread-and-butter courses. What is the goal? A spokesman for the liberal arts states his credo: "We would have one goal, the stimulation of our mind by the quest for the truth. From there on we wouldn't have to worry. A student could go out into the world and create his own design."

Tyndall's own solution is one of synthesis: both the arts and the technologies are necessary, and the varieties of colleges, courses, and ambitions are not incompatible. In his own metaphor, the university is a many-faceted crystal in which he can see only one facet at a time without being able to comprehend its vast wholeness.

Stylistically the book is first rate. The story is related in the clean, spare prose that Mr. Callaghan has used so skilfully in his previous novels. The superb black and white illustrations of university scenes by Eric Aldwinckle are so fine a complement to the story that one wonders why the art of book illustration has, in this century, been relegated almost exclusively to children's books.

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