

Tragedy of Isolation

THE CATHERINE WHEEL. By Jean Stafford. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 281 pp. \$3.

By WALTER HAVIGHURST

IT IS AN odd survival that the fiery pin-wheel, exciting childish wonder and delight, recalls the martyrdom of St. Catherine on the wheel of torture seventeen hundred years ago. In her superbly controlled novel Miss Stafford has shown a modern martyrdom; her story discloses the secret torture of two persons, a child and a woman, both caught in a tragic circumstance during a tranquil summer on the coast of Maine.

"The Catherine Wheel" is a varicolored novel, full of sunlight and shadow, of tide flats and rose gardens. Through it runs the loveliness of summer; but just beneath, like the sharp rock under the lacy surf, lies the passionate and tragic dilemma of Katharine Congreve, mistress of the great house above the river mouth. Closely linked with her is the lost boy, Andrew Shipley, very boyish in his scorns and his despairs and mysteriously clairvoyant in his fears. Here is tragedy without a villain, except the villain of human nature. In the flawless weeks of summer there is a silent understanding, and a growing misunderstanding, between the lost and frantic boy and the doomed, beautiful woman. Katharine Congreve thinks she reads her nephew's mind, and Andrew thinks that she must hear the voice inside his head—the voice which utters his primitive violence and which she believes utters his guilty knowledge of her love for his father.

Andrew and his twin sister are summing with their aunt while their parents are abroad. At the season's end Katharine Congreve is to face the only man she has ever loved, who is ready to sacrifice his family for the woman he might have married twenty years before. Slowly the summer passes in the great house and in the village brimming with gossip and esoterica. There are some grotesques among the minor figures, but the novel's central people are deeply, touchingly human. The story moves steadily inward, from the summer lawns and the tidal river to the woman's sleepless nights and the boy's beating against the bars of his empty and frantic life.

The end of summer must bring together Katharine Congreve and John Shipley, and what will happen then? A lesser novelist would need to confront them with each other, but Miss



—Arni.

Jean Stafford—"superbly controlled."



Katharine Talbot—"intuitive brilliance."

Stafford achieves a greater drama by keeping them apart—separateness is the fate of these people. Inevitable is a strong word and one too easily applied in fiction. But no smaller word can describe the ineluctable turning of the wheel of summer and the unhurried movement toward the boy's terror and his aunt's martyrdom.

The village in this novel is named Hawthorne, but even without that reminder it is clear that Miss Stafford is concerned with the identical plight that Nathaniel Hawthorne pondered in his stories—the tragedy of human isolation, the devious, painful, perilous struggle for harmony and understanding. "The Catherine Wheel" is a novel of great restraint and of great beauty.

Emotional Agony

FIRE IN THE SUN. By Kathrine Talbot. New York: G. P. Putnam's Son's. 247 pp. \$3.

By PAMELA TAYLOR

IN THIS haunting and almost fragmentary novel, concerning a few weeks in the lives of a handful of contemporary members of the London artistic world, Kathrine Talbot has achieved an extraordinary communication of emotional intensity. Veronica Demeade has learned to accept a life in the shadow of her brother Everett. Two years her senior, startlingly like her in beauty, a poet already moving in a legend of brilliance and magnetism, Everett has shared and dominated her emotional and mental existence. The sudden necessity of adjusting herself to his marriage to a beautiful heiress has sent her on an impulsive holiday to an unfamiliar Cornish fishing village, and here she meets and falls in love with a brilliant young painter, Robert Avery.

The first weeks of their mutual love are happy and golden. Robert takes Veronica to visit Hilary Duncan, a fabulous host and patron of the arts whose fascinating house, Trevartha, is near-by. Hilary declares himself ready to back the publication of her poems; his oddly assorted guests are delighted with the young lovers and interest themselves variously with Veronica's happiness. In this atmosphere and warmth the tentative, insecure Veronica blossoms into confidence. For the first time she stands in the full sunshine of life.

When the honeymooners return, and Veronica goes up to London to meet them and attend to some necessary business, the bright sun of her brother's magnetism, so carelessly cast on all who approach him, snuffs out her tiny individual flame. Her brief happiness begins to crumble as Robert, drawn irresistibly into Everett's dazzling orbit, hastens the inevitable tragedy to which brother and sister are doomed.

If her climax seems somewhat too melodramatic, it is the author's only failure. Extraordinary taste and delicacy enable her to handle without offense a subject which is still uncomfortable and distressing to most readers; the emotional and spiritual agony are there, but declared with such economy and sincerity that the inherent tragedy of the situation may be accepted without conscious interpretation of the Freudian symbols which crowd the pages.

It is, however, chiefly the portrait of

Veronica in her brief halcyon holiday which is memorable, and an earnest of what we may hope for in the future from this novelist. Her expertly realized description of a sensitive, gifted, and highly emotional young woman as she reacts to the external world, to people, and to her own sensations shimmers with intuitive brilliance.

Society Heroine

SYBIL. By Louis Auchincloss. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 284 pp. \$3.

By JOSEPHINE LAWRENCE

AT twenty-one, Sybil Rodman was pathetic, if not lovable; like many shy, intensely self-centered young people, she hated a world to which she could not contribute. She thoroughly disapproved of her parents and dissected them without mercy. Her relatives naturally distressed her, but it did not occur to her to refuse the gifts of a wealthy and generous aunt. If it had not been for the mistaken kindnesses of this Aunt Jo, Sybil might have saved her soul by the simple expedient of going to work—after all girls with fashionable society backgrounds have prided themselves on getting “jobs” to, these many years. Sybil read books, a distressing habit unfortunately often associated with girls who fail to make the grade with boys, but she never experimented with earning her own living.

Instead she married a wealthy young bachelor, a lawyer considered to be the catch of the season. Sybil accomplished this feat by means so devious that readers are likely to be as mystified as were the members of the bride's social set. Philip Hilliard, we're told, was attracted to Sybil because he sensed her devotion to him, but although “the shell over her emotion” of which he speaks may have been cracked, it was not dislodged. Sybil continued to be moody and difficult.

It is significant that she had only one attendant—the fiancée of her brother—when she married; Philip had fourteen ushers. No one will be too surprised to learn that eventually Philip began an affair with one of the girls who had confidently expected to marry him. Julia rather primitively argued that Sybil had taken Philip away from her and in the interests of justice she meant to take Philip away from Sybil. Expertly handled, Philip agreed to ask for a divorce, a request his wife immediately and amiably granted.

Public opinion and both families ral-
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The British Past.

Nearly all the volumes reviewed below deal with English life since the severance of our political ties. In a variety of ways these books about Britain's past are also about America's past. The exploits of the nineteenth-century English highwaymen that Patrick Pringle so absorbingly relates in “Stand and Deliver” (page 13) now belong to our own literature; the dramatic trials recounted in E. W. Fordham's “Notable Cross-Examinations” and Edgar Lustgarten's “Defender's Triumph” (page 15) have become a part of the fabric of our legal tradition; the precept and example of the figures in Samuel Shellabarger's “Lord Chesterfield and His World” (page 14) are still sedulously followed by our own young men on the make. Although Americans turned their backs on monarchy, they continue to be fascinated by the institution. Hector Bolitho gives some notion as to why it flourishes in England in “A Century of British Monarchy” (below).

The Influence of the King

A CENTURY OF BRITISH MONARCHY. By Hector Bolitho. New York: Longmans, Green & Co. 274 pp. \$6.

By R. ELLIS ROBERTS

AS I READ Mr. Bolitho's very readable, if rather haphazard, series of selected letters, brief essays of his own, unfortunate excursions into fancy where he challenges comparison with Laurence Housman, I was struck by one fact which he does not sufficiently emphasize. His book covers the century started by the Prince Consort's Great Exhibition and ended last year. It is a period in which, in spite of the setback caused by Victoria's seclusion for many years after Albert's death in 1861, the monarchy in England has increased in popularity and in usefulness. It would take too long to discuss all the reasons for this growth, so surprisingly in contrast to the fate of all European monarchies except those based on the English pattern. But one cause is insufficiently appreciated. Dur-

ing this last century the throne in England gained its freedom just as truly as did millions of its newly-enfranchised subjects. After the departure of the Stuarts the throne was really in subjection to the great families which had got rid of James II and who fought so bitterly against all attempts to reinstate the Stuarts. This dominance of the great houses over the Crown effectually prevented any contact between the sovereign and any but a minute fraction of the people. The monarch, when he had the character, had power; but it was held on sufferance. Of course royal power, even some royal privileges, have been curtailed since 1851: but only so, in our age of revolutionary change, could the monarch's influence be increased and strengthened. By the complete removal of the Crown from party politics, the king has been able to influence his people in a way that was not possible when he reigned by sufferance of the great houses, Whig or Tory.

It was not an easy transition. In its accomplishment three men influenced Victoria—Lord Melbourne, Benjamin Disraeli, and her husband, Prince Albert. Melbourne is out of the picture when Mr. Bolitho's century begins; his treatment of Disraeli is patronizing and inadequate; but Albert is allowed to speak in his own words in the first part of the book. Once more he appears as a man of exceptional character, great sense, and of far better taste than is commonly supposed. His great fault was his severity to his eldest son, and a belief that character can be



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