

was called his first "serious" novel. With "Splendor," a long, forthright story of a Boston newspaperman and his family through fifty years, Williams seemed to have found the field that fitted him best, historical fiction.

Williams defined an historical novel as one which "seeks to present an accurate and unprejudiced picture of some phase of history, but this may be merely incidental to the novel's theme . . . true history should record the changing way of life of the everyday individual." Thus, even though some of the action of "Splendor" had taken place during Williams's own lifetime, the book fitted his definition, for it told the "life story of an ordinary man" through the changing years from the Johnstown flood to the end of World War I.

Although "Splendor" outsold any of his previous books, he did not return to its standard or even its genre for many years. His next dozen books were slick romances, mysteries, and adventures turned out at an average of about two a year, this fast production dictated perhaps by the Great Depression and a writer's need for short-term gains. These were the years, Williams remembered later, when "I became over-anxious and couldn't sell all the stories I wrote." The books declined in quality and sales.

IT was at this point that Williams turned to the serious task which occupied him until his death. In thinking about the course of history he had come to believe that "even in wartime, the lives of ordinary stay-at-home people are more important to the world than the deeds of generals and statesmen." This, he said, led him "to begin at last a series of novels, each one of which would deal with life somewhere in the United States while the country was at war."

The first, published in 1939, was "Thread of Scarlet," a novel of Nan-

tucket in the War of 1812. A better than average adventure yarn, it was not up to the level the author was seeking and later found. In the spring of 1940 was published "Come Spring," a long, detailed novel of life in a Maine frontier village at the time of the American Revolution. This completely convincing, rich book had stout fiber and displayed skillful, honest craftsmanship. Critics called it an "epic work" and "one of the truest pictures we have of pioneer life." "Come Spring" was the full realization of Williams's authentic talent for first-rate historical fiction, hitherto only suggested in previous novels.

The rest of his career, an entirely successful one of almost uniformly good books for the past thirteen years (we may simply excuse "It's a Free Country" [1945] as an author's whimsey), is known to almost every reader of popular fiction. "Strange Woman" (1941) broadened his readership. Undoubtedly the urgency of World War II led him to write "Time of Peace" (1942), a novel about American life leading up to Pearl Harbor. It was followed by "Leave Her to Heaven" (1944).

When "House Divided" was published in the fall of 1947 it was the culmination of fifteen years of study and thought and fifty-two months of gargantuan labor. With varying degrees of justification some dissidents have thought the characters wooden within a real understanding of the Civil War, others have thought the author sentimentalized slavery, and others have charged the book with lacking spontaneity. But in general it was received as an "honest, strong and 'important' novel," and it has established itself as such. With it Williams fairly achieved his aspiration. And now "The Unconquered," rounding out "House Divided," provides a fitting capstone to his professional achievement.

Archeological Fables

"A Woman As Great As the World," by Jacquetta Hawkes (Random House, 184 pp. \$2.75) is a collection of fables so timely as to be timeless, the work of an English woman scientist with uncommon literary gifts. Mr. Halle, who reviews it here, is the author of "Birds Against Men" and other studies of nature.

By Louis J. Halle

IN THE Penguin edition of her "Prehistoric Britain" Jacquetta Hawkes tells of beginning work on that book in 1940, "when, if one listened to the intellect alone, a German victory seemed almost certain." The probability that Germanic peoples were about to repeat the prehistoric invasions of Britain touched her in a personal sense, for she was living near the ancient invasion-coast with a three-year-old son. Yet she found it "amusing to see in how many ways the present promised to mirror the past: . . . the feeling 'this has happened before' gave perspective to one's fate."

There you have Jacquetta Hawkes, a woman great enough to endure the world's violent approaches, since they are inescapable, with humor as well as regret. Not that there is anything in her present offering of fables, "A Woman As Great As the World," which you could call frivolous. Just as the humor of an invasion repeated after so many centuries belongs to tragedy, so does the humor of these fables. Aesop and La Fontaine were never more aware than she is of the darkness in which all mortal life displays its momentary brilliance. In fact, the fable as a literary form, because it takes an exclusively moral view of human society, necessarily has in it the elements of misanthropy and despair.

Aesop, La Fontaine, John Gay, and George Ade wrote fables that dealt, as fables must, with the vanities of what is called "society." So does Mrs. Hawkes; but hers is only occasionally the intimate "society" of courts or marketplaces. More often it is that "society" in which people exist as nations and have all Earth for the scene of their foibles. She has the perspective that distinguishes a century in which everyone feels crowded by events on the other side of the globe, in which invasion comes from the sky and suffering is wholesale.

It does not follow either that the subjects of these fables are particu-



—Walter Bird.



—Fabian Bachrach.

Jacquetta Hawkes and Ben Ames Williams—"the present promised to mirror the past."

larized and topical—in which case they would not be fables—or that their relevance is confined largely to our own times, like some of George Orwell's tales. If they betray a dominant preoccupation it is with mortality, not only of individuals but also of civilizations—as is appropriate to a British archeologist who has worked within the shadow of a threatened invasion. One fable after another presents variations on the theme of "Paradise Lost." The symbolic setting is sometimes a walled garden, another Eden, into which disorder is introduced. In the first story of all, "The Nature of a Red Admiral," destruction is brought about by the scientific curiosity of the solitary wasps and ichneumon-flies, that impulse to analyze one's environment which, in some of its manifestations, is indistinguishable from vandalism. In "The City of Cats" a symbolic civilization falls because it has achieved perfection, but by its fall prepares the ground for a repetition of the achievement. While such stories as these have their peculiar pertinence to our times, their timeliness is so broad as to be nearly timeless. Thucydides would not have read them without understanding; and Coriolanus might have thought that "The Woodpeckers and the Starlings" had been written for him.

Many of these fables derive a delicate flavor of bitterness from disillusion with the commonplace ideals of our civilization. "The Unites"—which is by far the longest, occupying over eighty pages where the others vary from one to a dozen—depicts a featureless society in which our ideals of peace and human equality have finally been realized. "Without privilege," however, "... excellence was lost; the ending of all conflict diminished energy; the reduction of social opposition, of difficulty, robbed life of much of its shape, its savor." This story, however, exceeds the dimensions of fable and is, rather, an allegory, like Orwell's "Animal Farm" or the Grand Inquisitor's tale in "The Brothers Karamazov." It is somewhat spoiled at the end when Mrs. Hawkes, betraying her own role, gives an unconvincing account of mankind's post-final regeneration.

IN this instance the feminine softness of the lyric poet in Mrs. Hawkes conflicts with the intellectual hardness of the moralist. Elsewhere, however, it simply gives wings to her language and her conceptions. The water of "The Fountain," when the narrow pipe that resisted its aspiration was at last broken, "could no longer send up the lofty crystal column or let fall a crystal shower. . . ." Instead, it

"welled up gently, making a little mound like a clear, trembling jelly." This is typical of the writing.

It is also typical of the morals that belong to many of the fables, not all of which represent vistas of Spenglerian history. "The Fountain," while it is as exquisite as anything that Katherine Mansfield ever wrote, is not only exquisite. It has, in addition, wisdom, thus leaving the reader with something to keep after the tale is ended. The same may be said of other fables, including that of "The Great Fish" who, by dying, became the one immortal. Others still, like that of the

two frogs who committed "elopdatory" together, have a humor that represents the ultimate sophistication of the anthropologist viewing our social taboos as from another planet. (Mrs. Hawkes should look out for the hemlock cup.)

Stories with overt morals have not been well regarded in our day, but surely they remain indispensable to the cultivation of human possibilities. In this volume of fables Mrs. Hawkes performs one of the noblest and most enduring functions of literature, that of translating experience into morality.

Labor Without Sympathy

James Hilton's "Time and Time Again" (Little, Brown. 306 pp. \$3.75) pictures a British scholar and gentleman of the old school doing his best to carry on amid the murder and mayhem of the mid-twentieth century.

By Harrison Smith

JAMES HILTON has never failed to entertain his readers, particularly those old enough to belong in that elastic period of life known as middle age, when a man prefers to be charmed by nostalgic resurrection of youth in the early years of this century rather than shocked by brutal and harsh interpretations of the present. "Time and Time Again," his latest, cannot rank with the best of his novels, but it has all of the pleasantly sentimental qualities of that lovable old schoolmaster Mr. Chips, combined with Mr. Hilton's faintly acidulous humor at the expense of the crudities of the succeeding generation.

Nevertheless, Charles Anderson of this story is a man not to be dismissed too readily as a relic of a forgotten past. He is, to use that pleasant and almost forgotten phrase, a gentleman and a scholar; not a schoolmaster in this case, but a member of the British diplomatic corps. He is also, this reader is convinced, a reflection of the author's personality. Mr. Anderson is only a year or two older than Mr. Hilton; both of them went to a lesser-known if highly respected school, were graduated from Cambridge, were members of the Cambridge University ROTC Corps in the last year of the First World War, and received a B.A. degree in History and the English Tripos (first class) from

Christ's College. Indeed, Charles Anderson might have been created in the image of the author if Mr. Hilton had chosen a career in diplomacy instead of literature.

In later years Charles suffered from his resemblance to the legendary perfect English gentleman. He was uncomfortable when he did not dress for dinner. It was not so much that he had passed the age, meaning his own age, as that the postwar age had passed him. He was inevitably called by his juniors in the service "Stuffy" Anderson and for that reason and others he never attained the rank justified by his life-long service to the country. It was his duty, he thought, to be suave and impeccably dressed. "Perhaps," writes Mr. Hilton, "he had been just too amusing, too witty, or that he had been to Brookfield instead of Eton."

The novel actually begins when Charles, fifty-three and as well groomed and as suave as ever, takes his seventeen-year-old son out to dinner in an elegant Paris restaurant and there discovers that the boy was not planning to leave on the night train to London as he had supposed, but counting upon meeting a woman fifteen years his senior. He rescued him from this dilemma as his own father, years before in a more violent manner, had saved his diplomatic

