

FICTION

Caste and Class

"Hester Lilly and Twelve Short Stories," by Elizabeth Taylor (Viking, 210 pp. \$3), is a baker's dozen of stories and sketches by an English writer known for her skilled and intelligent craftsmanship.

By William Peden

LIKE the work of her countrymen H. E. Bates and Angus Wilson, Elizabeth Taylor's finely-drawn pictures of English middle-class society are permeated with a feeling of moral fatigue and sadness not far removed from despair. "Hester Lilly," the moving and frequently frightening novella that gives its name to her newly published collection of short pieces, is characteristic: Mrs. Taylor's version of the eternal triangle centers around the breakup of the marriage of the headmaster of a provincial school, Robert Evans, and his outwardly cold and haughty wife, Muriel. The reagent in this drama of manners is Hester Lilly, Robert's teen-aged orphaned cousin. Passionate, awkward Hester is simultaneously one of the most irritating and most appealing homewreckers I have encountered in recent fiction. She is as plain physically as she is undistinguished morally or intellectually. To add to her difficulties, Muriel's spontaneous hostility causes Hester continually to say or do the wrong thing: "We are always mopping up for this girl," the bedeviled Robert reflects in a climactic scene wherein Hester is discovered to have broken an heirloom which the elegant Muriel greatly prizes. But Hester perseveres, in her fashion. Starved for love and understanding, she pursues Robert, a shaggy-dog, male-animal type tormented by a nineteenth-century conscience, with a persistency which is at least admirable in its sincerity and singleness of purpose. In spite of their basic differences, Hester, Robert, and Muriel are alike in their loneliness. Essentially decent and civilized people, they are undone by atavistic taboos and an appalling delicacy concerning sex. These unhappy individuals, it need hardly be said, find no solution to their problems; indeed, as Mrs. Taylor presents them, no solution is possible.

Mrs. Taylor develops her characters with intelligent understanding. Working conservatively and with admira-

ble restraint, she builds up a climax which is superficially obvious but actually shocking in its delineation of the tormented Muriel, who, in a series of shattering revelations, sees herself for the first time nakedly, steadily, and pitilessly.

Whereas the major characters of "Hester Lilly" are successfully created as complex human beings, the minor actors are triumphs of caricature: Miss Despenser, the faded aristocrat who lives in drunkenness and filth but meticulously tends the grave of the autocratic father who made her what she is; Mrs. Brimmer, the barwoman, with her loud mouth and her mysterious peepings into the nether reaches of her ample bosom; little Mooney, the brewer's son, bedeviled by his schoolboy associates they have the vitality of the people in a Hogarth drawing or a Dickens novel.

Like "Hester Lilly," Mrs. Taylor's best short stories depend for their effect primarily upon extremely convincing characterization. In "I Live in a World of Make-Believe," Mrs. Taylor illuminates a rather obvious class-and-caste concept by her portrayal of a likable little man victimized by his wife's social aspirations: in "Spry Old Character," a rather routine story of human failure is made memorable by her compassionate picture of Blind Harry, a gamey product of racetrack and pub. Few of these shorter pieces are really distinguished pieces of fiction; even the slightest, however, are the work of a highly intelligent observer who is always a skilled disciplined craftsman.



Elizabeth Taylor—"Hogarth vitality."



—David Lowenthal.

Milton Lott—"authentic talent."

Bison's Last Stand

"The Last Hunt," by Milton Lott (Houghton Mifflin, 399 pp. \$3.95), deals with that brutal chapter of our history in which the hunters wiped out the buffalo and revolutionized the West.

By Oliver LaFarge

A READER'S impression as he gets well into the opening chapter of Milton Lott's "The Last Hunt" is that here is an experienced craftsman whose work to date he has somehow missed. Actually, the author, at thirty-five, is a beginner. He has taken George R. Stewart's writing class at the University of California, and has written the book partly under the guidance of that gifted writer and teacher, and entirely in his spare time left over from supporting himself and his family on a full-time construction job.

Mr. Lott has an authentic natural talent. What its limits or lack of limits may be we cannot tell as yet, but the prognosis is hopeful. This first of its products is restrained, well organized, and mature.

It deals with the critical, brutal chapter of Western history in which the buffalo hunters wiped out the buffalo and revolutionized the West, but it is no mere period piece. The story is rich with local color, sustained by the rapid, logical succession of strong incidents, and elevated by the writer's own deep love for the region in which the action takes place. It is truthful fictionalization, heroic enough to fit its material and no more so, and at all times hews closely to the story of its protagonists as a good novel should.

The men who wiped out the buffalo were men; they were not inten-

tionally evil. Mr. Lott has set up four of them, teamed together by chance, each a prototype of one kind of frontiersman of the time and place, each strongly individual. He shows us how the tragedy they created becomes their own tragedy, to surmount or succumb to according to their capabilities.

The characterizations are not entirely satisfactory. Of the four—Sandy, Charley, Jimmy the half-breed, and Woodfoot—it is only Sandy all of whose motivations we understand in depth, out of the logic of his realized character and his past. Woodfoot is all of a piece; we accept him on faith. The other two partially escape us, and a good deal of what Jimmy does or others do in relation to him in order to reach his particular solution seems to be no more than the arbitrary will of the author.

STILL, these and a number of minor characters stay live in retrospect. The recital of day-to-day incidents and actions is convincing and vivid. There is startling matter from time to time—skinning dead Indians, shooting down Indian women, the senseless slaughter of animals by “sports” and scientists—but these items are derived from recorded history.

As we have grown increasingly conscious of our Western heritage, historical fiction dealing with it has tended to become more self-conscious, intentionally “important,” literary. This is readily apparent when one compares, for instance, “The Big Sky” with “The Virginian.” In contrast, Mr. Lott gives us unaffected narrative and sincere feeling, without flexing of muscles or what is becoming the boredom of huge canvasses. He has written a novel-length novel, every page of which is good reading.

Heroes Without Glamour

“*The Foster Brothers*,” by Edward Frankland (John Day, 310 pp. \$3.95), is the story of two barbarian Norsemen of the eleventh century, their exploits in war and their curious relationships with the same woman.

By Edmund Fuller

IN THE year 1002, we find a vessel sailing from Iceland. The foster brothers Gunnard and Arnvid are going to England to seek their fortunes in whatever ways offer—even the way of petty kingdom—for this was an era when the relatively lush fruitfulness of England was exploited ruthlessly by Danes and other Northmen. So begins “*The Foster Brothers*,” an historical novel of quality, different in manner, but of the substance of such as Alfred Duggan.

In the newly appearing volumes of “*A Study of History*,” A. J. Toynbee speaks of “the so-called ‘heroic ages’ that are episodes in the brief lives of barbarian war-bands.” Professor Toynbee has contributed to this novel an introduction which is one of its adornments, reiterating the point he has often made, that competent fiction is a mode of history. The introduction chiefly is a discussion of the Scandinavian Heroic Age, a world, he assures us, “startlingly different . . . from the mirage conjured up by its romantic name.”

What Mr. Frankland’s novel does for us then, in Toynbee’s words, is to

“peel off . . . the deceptive film of glamour and . . . reveal the life of the Heroic Age as it really was. This life then turns out to be both more sordid and less foreign than it looks at first sight.”

In Gunnar and Arnvid we see personified some of the fruits, of “encounters” between different cultures, or civilizations. Gunnar is the pure child of the barbarian North. He is good-natured, shrewd, strong, ruthless where property or women are concerned, unhesitating in his practical decisions. Arnvid, his foster brother, is half Iclander, half Welsh. He is an able fighter but has no zest for it. He has complexities of temperament and various odd, potentially fatal, hesitations which neither he nor Gunnar understand, but we would call scruples.

Arnvid chances to rescue a young woman named Astrid from King Ethelred’s terrible massacre of Danes in England. For the better part of a year they wander, in much perilous adventure, by land and sea, through Westmorland, Wales, Northumberland, and down to Wessex.

THERE is wry humor in this story, a sardonic variation on the Gareth and Lynette theme. Astrid phlegmatically accepts the fact that she now belongs to Arnvid, and is only puzzled and slightly contemptuous that he does not at once take her, sexually. He has fallen in love, has complicated the whole business with some moody notions about wanting everything to be just right before it comes to that. In consequence, nothing ever is right between this flower of barbarism and this unhappy precursor of a more complex type.

Arnvid and Gunnar find themselves unexpectedly reunited, serving the Danish King Sweyn in his harrying of Wessex. Then the oddly tender bond between these two comes under its own inevitable strains, over the question of Astrid.

The novel is beautifully written, perhaps not quite so well constructed. It has much adventure and suspense, and considerable humor with the unusual quality of being dry in its view and lusty in its manner. In the picture of eleventh-century Britain, the native people, and the Northmen whose domination is about to wane, “*The Foster Brothers*” is downright fascinating and revealing. It places easily in the elite class of historical fiction.

