

## FICTION

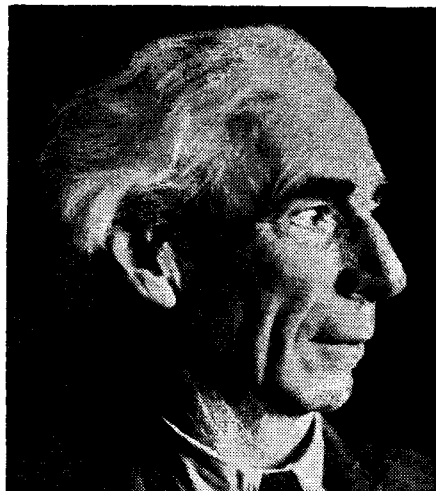
## Eminent Gadfly Adream

*"Nightmares of Eminent Persons and Other Stories," by Bertrand Russell (Simon & Schuster. 177 pp. \$3), unlike the distinguished British philosopher's first collection of short stories published two years ago, are frankly intended to provoke thought rather than to entertain.*

By William Peden

"COULD I but return to the old sublimities!" sighs a Bertrand Russell character. "Ah, how hard is the Life of Reason!" In one form or another, this lament animates most of the pieces in "Nightmares of Eminent Persons and Other Stories," his new collection of fables and two long short stories. Bertrand Russell has declared that his earlier stories ("Satan in the Suburbs," published two years ago when the author was eighty-one) were to be read simply as stories, that they were written with no desire to point a moral. But the present volume, he warns his readers, is not primarily for "amusement." Although some of the "Nightmares" are "purely fantastic," others "represent possible, though not probable," horrors; "Zahatopolk" is meant to be "completely serious"; and "Faith and Mountains" will appear fantastic only to readers who "have led sheltered lives."

In the "Nightmares" Lord Russell presents an intriguing series of dramatic situations: Stalin, a captive of American Quakers after a third



Lord Russell—"cool and ironic."

world war; Eisenhower, an unwilling spectator to a peace pact between McCarthy and Malenkov; the Queen of Sheba, outwitted by Beelzebub; an Existentialist who is reluctantly convinced that he exists. Similarly with the two longer pieces: "Zahatopolk" takes us into a terrifying future world comparable to that of "Brave New World" or "Nineteen Eighty-Four" while "Faith and Mountains" depicts the struggle between two rival and utterly phony "spiritual" leaders. In spite of their variety, such pieces are alike in their preoccupation with the evils of stupidity, hypocrisy, and blind faith.

At eighty-three Bertrand Russell remains a gadfly beneath the hide of conservative belief. Like most satirists, past and present, he works from the premise that "folly is natural to man." He suggests that all men—like the skeptical heroine of "Zahatopolk," who is burned at the stake for her "heresies"—are irrevocably damaged "when they substitute dogma for fact." The complacent reader will find much to disturb him in these cool, ironic stories, particularly in the constantly implied or directly stated warfare against all kinds of orthodoxy, religious, political, and social.

In insisting on replacing faith by fact, the author is less controversial than in his neglect of traditional storytelling methods. Most of these pieces, thought-provoking and stimulating though they may be, are disappointing as fiction. Russell makes no effort to individualize his characters. For the most part his people are as one-dimensional as the allegorical puppets of a medieval morality play. Similarly, he makes no effort to create the illusion of place-reality; the Peru of his "Zahatopolk" differs in name only from the London of his "Faith and Mountains" and most of the remaining stories take place in a complete vacuum. Finally, he tends to substitute rhetoric for incident, and dialectic for plot. Thus, though he provides much food for the intellect there is comparatively little here to engross, delight, or captivate. Even the most ardent admirers of Bertrand Russell will find the going occasionally too rough for narrative comfort. "Nightmares of Eminent Persons" is at best a byproduct in the literary career of one of the great thinkers of our century.



Patrick White—"one sentimentality."

## Pioneer Down Under

*"The Tree of Man," by Patrick White (Viking Press. 499 pp. \$4.50), is the story of the family of an Australian cattle raiser that in many ways resembles those of our own frontiersmen.*

By Walter Havighurst

PARALLELS between Australian and American frontier experience will occur to American readers of Patrick Walsh's solid and substantial novel of the Australian bush, "The Tree of Man." Mr. White tells the story of a restless youth, at the turn of the present century, who went into new country, cleared his pasture and raised cattle, and saw the land change past recognition in his lifetime. Externally, at least, it is like the story American novelists have told of frontier regions from Ohio to Oregon.

The novel begins with a primitive picture—a nameless man alone in the bush, striking his first axe-blows at the side of a hairy tree, breaking an immense silence. This is Stan Parker, son of a drunken blacksmith and a sensitive, ambitious mother (there are other echoes of D. H. Lawrence in this novel), who was torn between the desire for change and the need of permanence. After an awkward and silent childhood he had knocked around the Australian coast; now he has come to the bush and has marked out the corners of his future.

The novel moves deliberately, sometimes overly so, savoring the sights, sounds, smells of the wild land, looking into men's and women's feelings, observing changes in the land and its people. Stan Parker brings a wife to his place, a simple, wondering girl who becomes a sturdy woman. As the

seasons pass, new settlers come. Durilgai—it is like an American frontier name, an aboriginal word meaning “fruitful”—gets a store and a post office. To Stan and Amy Parker two children are born. Stan develops a good farm, a sound herd; he is respected in the district and known in the market town of Bangalay. But still he is vaguely uneasy, his life is unfulfilled.

To farming and to family life this man brought only a blunt determination. His only guide was his simplicity, and though that was sufficient in his farming it was not enough for him as husband and father. Much of this novel is given to a portrayal of husband and wife, their distance and their closeness, their protection of each other, the kindness that accompanied their essential separateness. The wife had capacities and yearnings that her husband could not share. The man could not communicate with his wife and children. The novel tells of people discovering each other too little and too slowly.

All of Mr. White's people are alive, believable, and sharply individual. There are salty old Mrs. O'Dowd—“life possessed her untidily” but it possessed her fully—and her unruly husband, the headstrong Parker son who gets mixed up in a Sydney racing scandal, the tractable daughter who marries a Sydney solicitor, old Fritz the German, and young Con the Greek, who by turns work on the Parker place. Some of these characters are shrewdly observed when the scene shifts from the lonely bush to the strident streets of Sydney.

Stan Parker is a less resourceful and zestful frontiersman than has frequently appeared in American fiction, and his inner failures are given more space than his outward accomplishments. This makes him a three-dimensional man. He is almost always believable, though not always interesting. In portraying this limited man Mr. White commits just one sentimentality. In the hour of his death—an old man amid the withered autumn grass—a great understanding comes to him, which for a moment he was able to share with his wife. “It was clear that One, and no other figure, is the answer to all sums.” This mystical awareness comes as an unlikely crown to Stan Parker's groping life.

## Literary Fireworks

“*The Walker and Other Stories*,” by Patrick O'Brian (Harcourt, Brace, 244 pp. \$3.50), is a collection of short pieces by a writer whose two novels (“*Testimonies*,” “*Catalans*”) have raised high expectations.

By Oliver La Farge

ON ONE who has read Patrick O'Brian's two previous books, both novels, the effect of the beginning of “*The Walker and Other Stories*,” his new collection of short pieces, vignettes, sketches (it is hard to say just what they are; hardly stories in most cases), is exciting. The novels showed ability, not all fully realized, including a gift for vivid description. That is here, with a turn for effectively relating the mood of the setting with the emotions, and able treatment of tense moments.

After reading the first few pieces I found myself thinking of another Irishman's lucidly effective prose, James Stephens, as he appears in “*Etched in Moonlight*.” But then excitement steadily dropped and the comparison became impossible.

The cumulative effect of these short pieces is disagreeable. Reading all two dozen of them in the course of three evenings required effort; to read the whole, short book at one sitting would have been impossible. Almost every piece is a tragic fantasy, literary fireworks, with sharp description, strong local color quickly developed, and a snapper at the end. Impending doom or the loom over one's shoulder of the yet unseen, unpleasant, surprise ending characterizes most of them. The snapper endings suggest the O. Henry trick but, unlike O. Henry's work, these are often obscure and in too many cases incomprehensible. The author seems to have been in too much of a hurry to light his firecracker under the reader and run, when he should have stuck around to make sure it went off.

In thinking of dealers in tragic fantasy and imaginative horror, John Collier and Arthur Machen come to mind inevitably; Mr. O'Brian achieves at moments a touch of Machen's atmosphere, but that is all. Perhaps if

one read these pieces one or two at a time, at wide intervals, all of them would have the impact of the first few. The more striking a trick is the less it will stand repetition. Wading through a bookful of the same thing the reader soon learns what to expect, surprise is eliminated, and monotony comes in its place. This is just as true of the grim and macabre as it is of Pollyanna optimism.

The end result of “*The Walker*” is disappointment, particularly so to anyone who has been watching Mr. O'Brian's development so far. These stories are a fine demonstration that brilliance in detail is not enough, can be, in fact, a pitfall for the writer.

## Notes

**VARIETY PACKAGE:** In “*Thunder Stone*” (Simon & Schuster, \$3.50) Sylvia Cooper presents a physician confronted with two moral crises. At the peak of his career as an eye surgeon, Dr. Carl Sholto is faced with the necessity of performing an operation on a child whose parents idiotically withhold consent. The doctor also must decide whether to shed his adulated wife for his much more sympathetic nurse. Though these may seem like familiar gambits of medical fiction, Mrs. Coopef's treatment of the doctor wrestling with his dilemmas is decidedly unroutine and tremendously convincing. Incidentally, Robert Montgomery recently televised it.

Although “*The Actor*” (Simon & Schuster, \$3.50) is a novel about the picture business, Niven Busch is refreshingly unconcerned with trotting out the usual collection of Hollywood grotesques. Instead, he is interested in sketching the character of Dan Prader, a fallible but likable man, who was once a star in quickie Westerns and who has now descended to falling off horses for a living. Mr. Busch makes of Dan's rise and falls an exciting story, permeated with the atmosphere of movie-making.

“*The Virginia Exiles*,” by Elizabeth Gray Vining (Lippincott, \$3.95), follows the fortunes of a small group of Quakers, interned in Virginia because of their neutralist attitude toward the American Revolution. Mrs. Vining (who described her experiences as a Japanese imperial tutor in “*Windows for the Crown Prince*”), makes a moderately interesting chronicle out of the shifting moral attitudes of a young Philadelphian who refuses to be the Quaker equivalent of a summer soldier.

Frances Siddorn, the lady novelist who is the heroine of Katherine Talbot's “*The Innermost Cage*” (Putnam,

