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DATE: 29th November, 1964.
TIME: 6.45 p.m.

"WHAT ARE YOU READING?"

by

ALAN LENNOX-SHORT

A.O.D.
(Opening
Announcement) "What Are You Reading?" our weekly book
talk is given this evening by Alan Lennox-Short.

A.L-S: REVIEWS ON TAPE

A.O.D. Next Sunday evening, at a quarter to seven,
our weekly book talk, "What Are You Reading?".
will be given by Denis Hatfield.

"WHAT ARE YOU READING?"

b,

ALAN LENNOX-SHORT

Whatever the cargo of novels I would like to discharge this evening - and a rich cargo some of them are - I make no apologies for again starting a broadcast with biographies, for, to begin with, I have for your consideration an important study of a brilliant South African by a writer of significance - Alan Paton's biography, "HOFMEYR", published by Oxford.

Few of us are unaware of the Hofmeyr legend. As Mr. Paton puts one aspect of it: "Hofmeyr's appointment as professor at 22 was received with pride by his family and friends. It was of a kind with his earlier achievements, his Matriculation at 12, his degrees and Rhodes Scholarship at 15, his double first at Oxford".

But it is a merit of this biography that one of its primary concerns - and it succeeds in this, for it is a conviction that remained with me after I closed the book - one of its primary concerns is not a catalogue of successes, but the partial adaptation of his brilliant mind to human circumstances, the upward struggle of a man in collision with the harshness that our world can be politically and generally.

Mr. Paton does not genuflect in front of an image of an idol. Whatever his admiration and regard for J.H. Hofmeyr, he makes no bones about Hofmeyr's faults and weaknesses, some, understandably, the result of brilliance outstripping maturity, notably in Hofmeyr's failure - not as an official, but as a human being - his failure adequately to fill the position of principal of the University of the Witwatersrand.

Nor does Mr. Paton disguise his hostility to Mrs. Hofmeyr, who with justice could claim that, even at the height of his power, her son lived with his mother rather than she with him.

But with all its achievements - its penetration, its industry, the multiplicity of its facts and Mr. Paton's ability effectively to manouevre them - I came away from this biography a little hungry. Mr. Paton can write so well that it is exasperating that he does not always write well; he can get bogged down in gossipy detail, he can be spinsterishly skittish. And, in groping for adjectives to describe Hofmeyr, one - with this biography as confirmation - one is left with the word "gifted" rather than "great".

But, whatever the flaws of Hofmeyr, the man, and Paton, the biographer, this book, "HOFMEYR", emphasises the quality of both. It is basic reading for all to whom South Africa is important.

Any biography about Britian's new Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Wilson, is a book of the moment, and no exception is G.E. Noel's "HAROLD WILSON", published by Gollancz.

It's possible, of course, to find similarities in the careers of Wilson and Hofmeyr. There is the same intellectual brilliance, the same religious background, the same decision to leave a university for politics, the same accusations of impersonality, the same early attainment of high office. Mr. Noel remarks of Wilson: "Oxford's youngest don since Cardinal Wolsey could, if further promoted within a year, set another record by becoming a cabinet minister while still in his twenties - bearing in mind that we live in a different period to that of the younger Pitt. In fact, he just missed, but became President of the Board of Trade at thirty-one".

But, if there are similarities of theme, there can be no question that Mr. Paton is the better biographer. Mr. Noel is too cold, too detached. He has his touches of humour - his remark, for example: "Harold Wilson was undoubtedly more serious than most

undergraduates of his day, which of course is not saying much". He is capable of an apt comment such as: "Sir Alec is retiring and self-effacing, but not particularly modest, while Wilson is indefinably, but distinctly, modest, though in no way self-effacing or retiring".

But, on the whole, "HAROLD WILSON" - by that I mean the title of the book - "HAROLD WILSON" is a record of facts and events, and the portrait of a man emerges only with difficulty. This is a pity, for, as Mr. Noel himself remarks, Wilson "has been described as one of the most enigmatic statesmen of the century".

Although this is no doubt entirely fortuitous, the appearance of no novel could have been better timed than that of C.P. Snow's "CORRIDORS OF POWER", the ninth in the sequence "Strangers and Brothers", for its theme is Whitehall and the British Parliament and the political currents and tides flowing between them, currents that at the moment will have been agitated, sometimes highly agitated, by Labour's hair-breadth accession to power.

If the general theme of the novel is the ebb and flow of personal and party power, the policies that are shaped not only by the cabinet ministers but by the civil servants - its personal illustration is, in a nutshell, the collapse of a Tory minister and his policy, and, in the background, the consequences of an amorous adventure and of the dissections so industriously undertaken by the Security Services.

This is no easy subject. It belongs to a special world of its own, known usually to the initiated, a world as delicate and complicated as a cobweb, each cobweb with an inhabitant sensitive to every vibration. But Sir Charles threads his way through his social, political and emotional mazes and corridors with masterly assurance. It is not only that he has briefed himself extremely well, but that he knows how to set his stage and establish an atmosphere - the atmosphere of clubs, country-houses and London homes in which political reputations are created, destroyed or

re-inforced. But Sir Charles is more than an accomplished novelist within narrow boundaries. He is, from long experience, fully conscious of and well able to reflect the scientific, economic and other international forces that beat against or sustain a government of any significance.

My only criticism is that, in introducing his characters to us. Sir Charles adheres to a set formula of description preceding action, reaction and dialogue. But this in no way implies that, if his method is sometimes mechanical, the results are necessarily poor. He knows his people, and, what is more, makes them known to us.

I think it is possible to say that, if Sir Charles has an absorbing story to tell, he tells it so well - so deftly, urbane and delicately - that, artistically, it is extremely satisfying. His is a double triumph. He reflects our age and the reflection has permanence.

The publishers of "CORRIDORS OF POWER" are, appropriately enough, Macmillan.

Though there is far more to it than that, "mad", "murderous" and "lecherous" are the superficial words for the Narraway household, with every bed a free-for-all, and, apart from Uncle Edmund, floundering like a rhinoceros in this human jungle, with every member of the family frying in emotional flames.

"I have come to see the worms' dance", says Elsa.

"I want emotion and pistol shots", says Isabel.

"I was being followed round the house by an enormous black tea-pot", says Otto.

But Iris Murdoch gives her outrageous world such reality that while we're in it we do not question it and with pleasurable excitement move from one explosion to the next. In the end the dust settles for a moment and anguish and deprivation bring a temporary peace.

This novel, "THE ITALIAN GIRL", is a brilliant work. Miss Murdoch, in fact, is one of those rare writers who can combine absolute authenticity with consummate artistry. The sections of her story cleave together as beautifully as the coats of an onion and she unpicks them with delicate precision to reach, at last, the core of her story.

Hers is writing so impeccable that we are aware of it only through the influence that her people and their lives exert on us. Indeed, such is the quality of "THE ITALIAN GIRL" that, even though you may shake your head over the fascination that the monstrous has for Miss Murdoch, you will be unable to refuse her the acclamation she so justly deserves. Her publishers, by the way, are Chatto and Windus.

Erich Maria Remarque's "THE NIGHT IN LISBON" - its publishers are Hutchinson - is certain to be - in fact, overseas it already is - a best seller. It's got all the ingredients.

After all, when a perfect stranger thrusts all the documents he needs into the hands of a German refugee desperately struggling to escape the Nazi terror closing in on him during the last war, and his only payment is to listen to a tale of hairbreadth escape and ultimate calamity, the reader has in his hands the sort of plot and situation that will keep his nose down. Add to that Mr. Remarque's ability to make the most of suspense and anticipation and success is almost certain.

But for me the novel doesn't quite come off. For one thing, Mr. Remarque has chosen an arduous technique. It's very difficult to present convincingly a variety of situations, and people, through one man's memories, and it's artificial in the extreme that anyone should take it into his head to spend the night discussing the intimacies of his life with a complete stranger. And too often that life is dead. Mr. Remarque presses all the right buttons,

but his puppets remain mechanical. They're obedient, they do what they're told, but they're often listless.

Even so, the facts, the events of this novel are in themselves an appalling indictment of man's savagery, of what happens when a civilization collapses and a country is plunged into darkness, dragging others down with it.

It is for this that I shall remember "THE NIGHT IN LISBON".

Dear boozy, breezy Brendan Behan - if you'll forgive the pardonable alliteration - has come to life again in "BRENDAN BEHAN'S NEW YORK", illustrated by Paul Hogarth - not, however, as good as his namesake - and published by Hutchinson.

Some of his material has been dragged in by the hair of its head, but, for all that, Mr. Behan gallops away with us with his impressions of what he calls "the greatest city in the world, view it any way and every way - back, belly and sides", a city where he knows or knew every place and nearly every person that matters - from the Supreme Court to Harlem.

I relished particularly Mr. Behan's daft common sense, his rumbustious enjoyment of life and liquor, his dislike of shilly-challying. "Nobody asks for money who doesn't genuinely need it", he remarks. "It's like saying you've got a personal friend. If you have a friend, he's a friend. How the hell can he be otherwise than a personal friend?".

And Mr. Behan goes on to cap that with a tale told of Gilbert Harding, who, informed by a society hostess in Toronto that his address in that city was not a very good one, replied: "No. Neither is Toronto".

There's some hard hitting in "BRENDAN BEHAN'S NEW YORK", but there's also some very good fun.

Usually I greatly relish a Simenon and though, this time, the flavour is a little different, I can recommend to you his "THE DOOR", translated from the French by Daphne Woodward, and published by Hamish Hamilton. You'll get, not your murder's worth, but this time, your suicides' worth.

Once again - for this novel, or long short story rather, though published in France in 1962, has just appeared across the Channel - once again Mr. Simenon has demonstrated his flair for explosive, emotional compactness.

As usual his cast is small - basically, it is husband, wife and the other man. The husband is a war victim who has lost both his hands. He it is who is a prisoner at home, doing small domestic chores, watching the neighbours, while his wife goes out to work

It is understandable that jealousy should fester in him, but it was fate rather than any malice that brings on his wife's suicide and then his own.

The dialogue, the characters, the atmosphere are typically Simenon, so that once again "THE DOOR" is compulsive reading.

As you may want me to repeat them, here again are the titles of the books I've discussed this evening:

"HOFMEYR" by Alan Eaton, published by Oxford University Press;
"HAROLD WILSON" by G.F. Noel, published by Gollancz;
"CORRIDORS OF POWER" by C.P. Snow, published by Macmillan;
"THE ITALIAN GIRL" by Iris Murdoch, published by Chatto & Windus;
"THE NIGHT IN LISBON" by Erich Maria Remarque, published by Hutchinsons;
"BRENDAN BEHAN'S NEW YORK" by Brendan Behan, published by Hutchinsons;
"THE DOOR" by Georges Simenon, translated by Daphne Woodward,
published by Hamish Hamilton.

Goodnight.