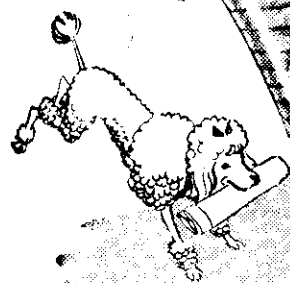


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BOOKS

(continued from previous page)

an indigenous drama and theatre, only ours are far the more formidable.

In any colonial society vested interests, with much capital at stake, naturally choose, in plays and players, what the great world has approved. Public preference for imported culture touches the theatre, and prejudice against local subjects as uninterestingly familiar has to be broken down. The writing craft is difficult, and pioneers in it tend to be over-serious and preoccupied with misery. It is easier to write passable tragedy than good comedy, and the public likes a laugh. The one Australian dramatist who has made a fortune in London's West End, Haddon Chambers, exploited social and partly artificial comedy, and so did the New Zealander Arthur Adams in his one London success.

Yet this book, well written and illustrated, reveals a body of achievement that must surprise many Australians and astonish most New Zealanders. Compared with Australia, we have hardly started. In the middle period there were many successes in the school of rural melodrama, particularly in adaptations of such popular novels as *Robbery Under Arms* and *For the Term of His Natural Life*. Many years ago in Auckland, I saw a version of Nat Gould's *The Double Event*, a story with which I was deplorably familiar. Alfred Dampier, George Darrell, Bland Holt and others gave the Australians entertainment racy of the soil and later there was the enormous success of *On Our Selection*. However, the cinema killed melodrama, and naturally there was a movement for plays more literary in style (an unsatisfactory term) and truer to life. Leslie Rees, who is Federal Drama Editor for the Australian Broadcasting Service, takes us through this movement, which was led by Louis Esson, to the wider opportunities provided today by radio and an expanding repertory world. Douglas Stewart has succeeded both on the stage and on the air. His *Fire on the Snow* has gone round the world and become a University textbook. There is a long list here of men and women (Ruth Park is one) who write serials for radio and plays for repertory theatres. Leslie Rees, however, has no mind to flatter the cause that is so dear to him. He ends by stating plainly what he thinks Australia needs in better craftsmanship, acting and production, before it can achieve a national drama in the full sense of the term. No doubt what he says applies to New Zealand.

—A.M.

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

THE HIVE, by Camilo Jose Cela; Victor Gollancz, English price 12/6. *THE MYSTERIOUS PREGNANCY*, by Nigel Heseltine; Victor Gollancz, English price 12/6. *THE BRIDE OF LLEW*, by Juliette de Bairacli Levy; Faber and Faber, English price 20/-.

IN a Madrid cafe an ageing vamp spends her last peseta on a small cigar, a well-dressed gigolo goes off to a meeting with his latest flame, a threadbare writer named Martin Barco is thrown out because he cannot pay for his coffee. Camilo Jose Cela has been described as the leading Spanish novelist of our time, and his picture of Spanish life in *The Hive* (translated by J. M. Cohen) is about as realistic as the novel can get. Cela starts with a group of characters in a cafe, and follows them in their brief encounters about the streets of the city for a few shabby days. He is preoccupied with their poverty,

their multitudinous love affairs, the state of their intestinal tracts, and the kind of tobacco they smoke, which as often as not comes from discarded butts picked up on the pavements. Martin Barco, a rebellious intellectual, is one of the few decent characters in the book, and he looks at the city with "the eyes of a sick and harassed child." Luckily the author's misanthropic attitude towards life in general is relieved by the warm compassion he reserves for these unfortunate individuals. With his staccato camera-eye technique he is able to focus, often for less than a page at a time, on nearly 150 characters. The result is sometimes a bit confusing, but then Cela is concerned not so much with telling a story as with presenting "a slice of life," and in *The Hive* he has done exactly that.

The setting of *The Mysterious Pregnancy* is Paris, where Mrs. Rienzi, the Irish-born widow of an Italian nobleman, arrives in search of her latest lover, who has deserted her in her hour of need. Also on hand are a young couple, Kevin and Sara, the latter apparently in the same condition as Mrs. Rienzi, and a pair of eccentrics named St. Ives and Blayne. The comic sophistication of Nigel Heseltine's first novel is a little too earnest to be really amusing, and it is Kevin, the timorous young English aesthete, who reflects most accurately the novel's mood.

"Oh, it's terrible, the hunting of things," says Harriet Brady, the wealthy recluse of *The Bride of Llew*, to her handsome young gypsy husband. When Harriet drowns herself Llew is hunted down and arrested on the charge of murdering her, and after much suffering in prison he dies. This is the framework for a passionate protest against capital punishment, prison conditions, and blood sports—a convincing treatise, despite the hysteria which mars many of the book's pages, on the theme of man's inhumanity to his fellow-beings.

—P.J.W.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE LEGACY OF PERSIA, edited by A. J. Arberry; Oxford, at the Clarendon Press; English price, 21/-. This addition to the famous "Legacy" series covers every phase of Persian history, religion and culture. The contributors are all authorities in their different fields, and there are numerous illustrations.

UNBROKEN, by Alistair Mars; Frederick Muller Ltd.; Australian price, 15/6. The story of the only British submarine operating in the western Mediterranean in early 1942. Although an authentic narrative, it is told as fiction.

THE WOMAN AND THE WHEEL, by T. B. Morris; Shakespeare Head; Australian price, 13/-. A thriller which moves rapidly, and with an unusual background on the fringe of Bohemia.

IN the ZB Book Review session on Sunday evening, January 17, five books will be discussed. Two are to be reviewed by Marie



Bullock—"Anna Fitzalan," by Marguerite Steen, and "The Unhappiest Hour," by Stewart Hamilton. The other books and their reviewers are: "Famous Plays of Today" (Ernest Blair); "The BBC From Within," by Lord Simon (Ormond Wilson); and "Time's Corner," by Nancy Wilson Ross (Dorothy White, above).

N.Z. LISTENER, JANUARY 8, 1954.