

FOUR AGAINST TIME

CHAMPION IN EXILE, by Jaroslav Drobný; Hodder and Stoughton, English price 15/-.
INNOCENCE UNDER THE ELMS, by Louise Dickinson Rich; Robert Hale, English price 15/-.
GUARDSMAN, by Alan Roland; Museum Press, English price 12/6.
MY WRITING LIFE, by Neil Bell; Alvin Redman, English price 16/-.

(Reviewed by David Hall)

THESE autobiographies have nothing in common, except that they prompt the reflection that even a fourth-rate personal narration is a great deal more interesting than most second-rate novels. And I don't mean to imply that these books are fourth-rate, still less that they are all first-rate.

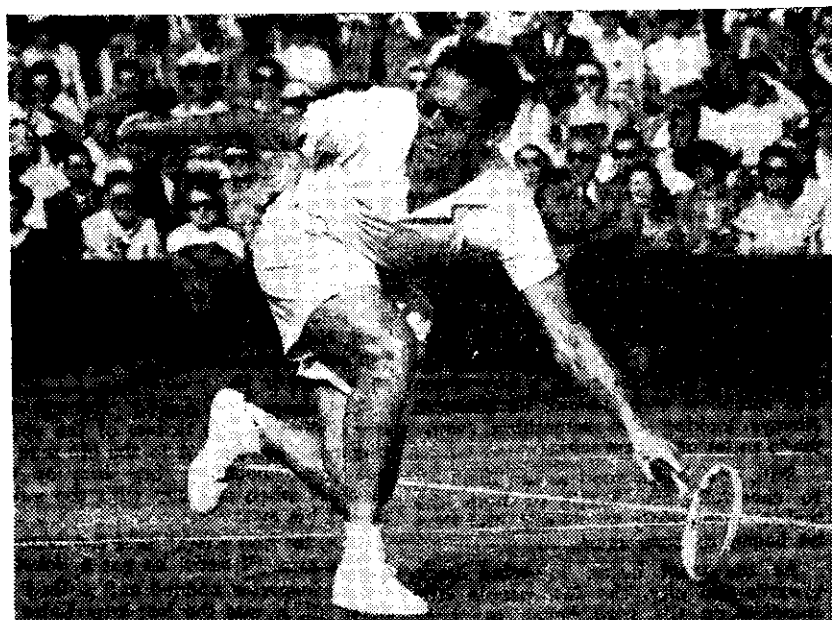
As a person, a "human being," the exiled Czech sportsman, Drobný, attracts me most of these four. He is so perfectly convinced that we really want to know how he came to win at Wimbledon in 1954, and at so many other places, that his book does become genuinely enthralling, even to someone like me who knows about as much about tennis (or ice hockey, Drobný's second accomplishment) as about the pedigrees of racehorses. Drobný escaped from behind the Iron Curtain in 1950 simply by not going home from a tournament in Switzerland. Today he lives in England, but it was Egypt that gave him citizenship.

Nearly all the numerous photographs show the bearlike champion swiping left-handedly at a ball, at once amiable and intensely serious.

Louise Dickinson Rich describes her childhood in a New England small town with calculated fluency and charm. The *Saturday Evening Post* would just lap this up, so wholesome and gay and folksy it is. She represents one of the strongest American superstitions, that all nice people come up the hard way, or at least find happiness only in simple things. Undoubtedly she is a nice person.

Guardsman describes the life of a young man joining the Grenadier Guards in the nineteen-thirties and ends with the outbreak of war. It tends to discount the idea that Guards regiments have especially tough discipline—plenty of ceremonial stuff, yes. But these memoirs, even with love episodes thrown in, are a little thin to make a book, and the author's personality is only dimly glimpsed.

Neil Bell exhibits his personality quite clearly in this story of his literary career, from the beginnings as a young teacher earning pocket money writing children's stories to the fully fledged novelist. With some 80 books behind him, he has achieved at least a quantitative success. He writes vigorously and gives advice about the business side of authorship which will be valuable to



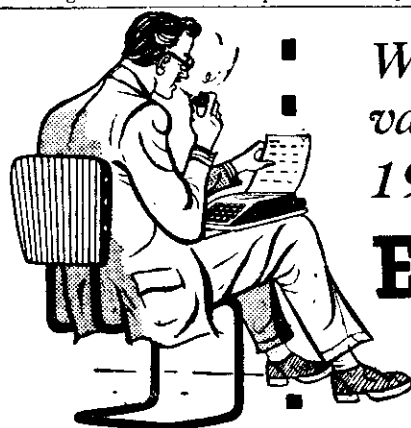
JAROSLAV DROBNÝ

"A fourth-rate personal narration is more interesting than most second-rate novels"

young writers entering a contracting market. He has plenty of crotchets, but disarms us by confessing to most of them. He has a "thing" about reviewers: "For why write about a book if you dislike it? There is but one answer to that question, and it does small credit to those it concerns." Prickly, unbid-

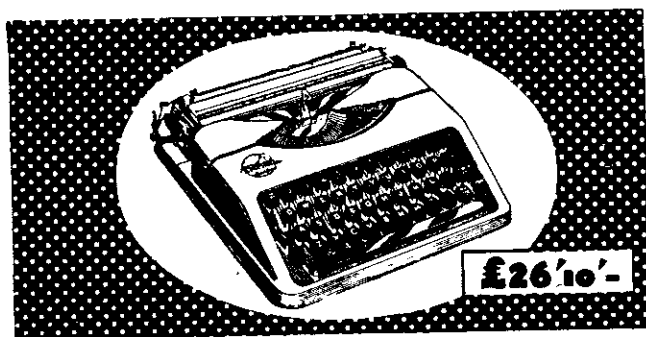
dable, shoulder-chipped, but cherishing a harsh integrity, Neil Bell will realise I am just another of those snooty conspirators, unable to give credit where it is overdue, when I stoop to remind him that he himself tells us that most people dislike him on a first acquaintance.

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