THE EVENING STANDARD BOOK PAGE . . .

The best war book I've ever read

A famous writer talks about the book that has influenced him most.

by H. E. BATES

STEPHEN CRANE'S novel of the American Civil War, The Red Badge of Courage, was not only the first important work of fiction to be inspired by that very bloody struggle, but has since been described as the greatest war novel ever written, with the possible exception of Tolstoy's War and Peace.

Sixty years after the book's first appearance I do not regard the claim as being at all extravagant.

All dreams

Crane's story is, in outline, though not in essence, a very simple one; so simple that it can be told in a couple of sentences.

A youth, in fact a mere boy, goes off to war as if to a circus, all dreams, all heroic, all starry eyed, a fine martial spirit kindled in his heart and ready to thrill to the splendid sound of guns. War is fine; war is fun; and the boy feels "growing within him the strength to do mighty deeds of arms."

In less than 200 plotless, episodic pages he is shown what war is really like. He is driven through a charnel house of scarlet butchery.

He comes out of it at the other end to find that he has "rid himself of the red sickness of battle"; that "he had been to touch the great death and found that, after all, it was but the great death"; and, finally, that he is no longer a boy but a man

The first and perhaps most remarkable thing to be noted about this book, upon which Ernest Hemingway has commented that "it is one of the greatest books of our literature," is that it was written by a young man who had never seen a war, let alone the American Civil War.

Crane had not even been born when the battles he so marvellously and realistically described were being waged.

Yet years later, when he did, in fact, go to war, to report the Greco-Turkish struggle, he said to Joseph Conrad: "My picture of war was all right! I found it as I had imagined it."

Crane demonstrated one of the oldest and most enduring of artistic truths: namely that fidelity to imagination will carry the artist farther and more surely than mere fidelity to observation, however exact and however skilled.

And that instinct will reveal for him things nearer the heart of truth than mere experience, however rich and prolonged, can ever provide.

Crane arrived on the literary scene while still ridiculously young. The Red Badge Of Courage appeared in 1895, when he was 24; five years later he was dead. How had perfection in his art been achieved at such an early age and with such incredible swiftness?

No training

The answer is that it had not. It was simply there. Just as Michelangelo could draw from the word go, so Stephen Crane could write from the word go.

No apprenticeship in letters was necessary to him. At an age when the young Tolstoy, the young Maupassant, and the young Henry James were painfully learning their craft, in common with generations of other writers, Crane was already fully equipped.

He had nothing to learn. "His technique," it has been well said of him, "is absolutely his own, and by its innate laws of being has arrived at a perfect fullness of power. What he has not got he has no power of acquiring."

What, then, had Crane, so God-gifted, so richly precocious, *not* got? The answer lies in another of the most ancient of truths about art and artists, namely, that mere technique, however superb, is not enough. In other words it is, in the final assessment, not the artist that counts, but the man.

In Crane the man a streak of weakness led him to excesses and extravagances that rapidly sapped the fibre of the young artist.

The pinnacles

When you begin at the top you cannot go higher; and Crane's descent from the shining pinnacles of The Red Badge of Courage and the superb stories in The Open Boat to the grey, debt-charged drudgeries of mere reporting was swift and inevitable.

Nevertheless, you can count him, on the strength of this incredible single book, "this great boy's dream of war," as one with Tolstoy.

THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE is included in the Stephen Crane Omnibus, published by Heinemann. 21s.

No revolvers, gentlemen, said the Empire man

by GEORGE MALCOLM THOMSON

FIGURES IN EBONY. By Raymond Tong. Cassell. 16s.

ANYBODY who tries to find a coherent pattern in the building of the British Empire has his work cut out for him.

Anybody who supposes that its builders were inspired by a single-minded passion for enlarging the area on the map coloured red is taking far too simple a view.

By accident, by mistake, through the zeal of one local officer, or the imprudence of another—so were the Empire's frontiers pushed outwards and the home government, often to its dismay, found that it had become responsible for a little more of the earth's surface!

Take the case of Benin, in Nigeria, once a Negro kingdom.

Its ruler, the Oba, had, like some other African kings, a partiality for human sacrifice. Sir Richard Burton, explorer and translator of The Arabian Nights, took a charitable view of the practice.

Asked why another African king did not abolish the custom, Burton exploded: "Alter the custom! Would you have the Archbishop of Canterbury alter the Liturgy?"

Borders shut

Not all British officials took this tolerant view.

In 1892, one of them persuaded the Oba of Benin to abolish the practice. The Oba then regretted his decision and shut the borders of his kingdom to Europeans. The ban was ignored by Consul-General Phillips

This resolute, if ill-advised, Englishman brushed aside the Oba's explanation that, during an important religious festival, he could not be seen by strangers.

Phillips and eight other white men were ambushed. "No revolvers, gentlemen," said Phillips sternly to his companions.

Their monument can be seen to this day.

After this, Britain lumbered into punitive action. Benin was captured. Ghastly relics of hundreds of human sacrifices were found. Crucifixions were frequent. This form of execution was all that was left of a century of Portuguese missionary work.

"It's just about time," said one of the British sailors in the punitive force, "somebody did visit this place!"

The British Empire visited Benin and there, to this day, it remains. Where the war-god's shrine stood, soaked with blood, is now the provincial education office.

Uneasy magic

Benin, with its appalling, very recent past, exercised a spell over Raymond Tong, who spent four years there in the Education Service. He has tried to pass on the uneasy magic in the pages of this inexpert but sincere little book.

His readers will be left with an uneasiness of their own. The bloody pre-British past may seem remote. And the present Oba of Benin has cut down the royal harem to eight wives.

But in the palace of an intelligent Benin chief Mr. Tong saw a little shrine on which someone had recently sacrificed a cock.

After 50 years of earnest British effort, what will Benin finally absorb of democracy and other products of our civilisation?

A TREASURE

A CONCISE HISTORY OF ART. By Germain Bazin. Thames and Hudson. 35s.

HERE is treasure indeed! A history of art which is concise without being indigestible, which has a great many illustrations, yet none of them imposes too great a strain on the eyesight.

In fact, it may be said that clever M. Bazin, who is Director of the Louvre, has written an account of man's plastic expression of his feelings which is selective enough to appear complete. It is unusually readable as well as easy to look at.

THE HICK WHO CAME BACK . . .

A SUMMER PLACE. Sloan Wilson. Cassell. 16s.

THE summer place in question is an island off the coast of Maine, the jealous preserve of a dozen wealthy families.

At least, that was how it was when Ken Jorgenson, a poor, clever, ambitious youth employed by the islanders as a swimming instructor, first knew it. He was enormously impressed by it all.

Ken fell in love with Sylvia Raymond and she would have done with him if she had not realised that to do so would have made her a figure of fun.

Instead, she treated him as a figure of fun and married Bart Hunter, the grandest young man of them all

But the Hunters lost their money, Bart turned the summer place into a hotel and became an alcoholic, and the beautiful Sylvia became a drudge.

Ken, on the other hand, became a millionaire, and what should he do then but come to the island in his hired yacht and put up at the hotel with Helen, his frigid wife, and Molly, his teen-age daughter.

You have guessed it: Ken has never forgotten Sylvia or she him, and they fall into each other's arms.

Mechanical plot

In the divorce actions that follow the sex-hating Helen is given the custody of Molly and the drunk Bart the custody of his and Sylvia's son John.

The boy and girl are in love with each other. Young as they are, can their love triumph over the tangled situation in which their parents exist? Will it? Won't it? It does.

Sloan Wilson believes in putting his characters through the emotional mangle. It would be more moving for the reader if the characters were more subtly drawn and the plot less mechanical.

Where A Summer Place succeeds is as a guide to the intricacies of American snobbery and the mysteries of the American class system.

WALTER ALLEN