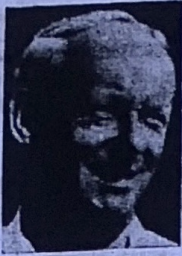


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H. E. BATES

BOOK PAGE today welcomes two of Britain's top writers as guest critics. First, 'Flying Officer X' examines...

The fear that stops a man from flying

...AT LAST THEY'RE NOT AFRAID TO TALK ABOUT IT

by
H. E. BATES

author of a dozen best-sellers, but best known of all perhaps for his famous wartime short stories which he wrote under the name of Flying Officer X.

"WHEN you get back—if you get back. When you get back—if you get back. If you get back—"

These ominous and mocking words, which I sometimes think will go prancing round in my head for the rest of my days, were almost the first I ever heard at a bomber station briefing. The fact that I wasn't operational did nothing to make me less frightened as I listened, or to lessen the impact of the long chorus of cold young laughter that greeted them.

"When you get back—if you get back—" The repetition of them not only haunts me again but suggests them as the most appropriate text about which **THE HOLLOW SQUARE** (Peter Davies 15/-). Geoff Taylor's novel of a bomber pilot accused of L.M.F.—lack of moral fibre to you, combat neurosis to Americans—might well have been written.

No longer...

IF you are old enough to remember what a Stirling looks like you will no doubt recall that nobody, at the time, told you anything about such things as L.M.F.

Of course not. But fortunately there is no longer a prayer-hush to cushion carefully the strange fact that fighting men, especially flying men, are often very, very frightened. The war's medical histories have made the fact respectable.

Geoff Taylor's hero—no, not an ironic term—did in fact come back, after I don't know how many trips over the cauldrons of Hamburg, Bremen, Bochum, etc., the breast-pockets of his crew bulging with the usual rabbits' feet, lucky charms, and *No Orchids For Miss Blandish*, to find himself a quaking moral heap, court-martialled for refusing to fly.

Astounding

THIS lapse is all the more astounding because Sergeant-Pilot Truett was almost a mascot to a crew who were "more than just a crew flying together in an airplane. They were a crew fighting in it as a corporate team"—and they had five more trips to do in order to complete their second tour. "On the last trip before these Truett almost kills his crew by failing to take an

obvious piece of avoiding action in a raid over Bochum, and it isn't long before he is confessing that "I was stiff with fright. Like a spook on his first night solo."

More ominous still, he confesses that it isn't the dicey trips that have him twitching but the quiet ones.

Soon he is refusing to fly at all, and his inevitable court martial, complete with as good a thumb-nail sketch of an ice-hearted snob of a young wing commander as I've read for a long time, is the first of a bitter chain of events that breaks him.

Authentic

THE end, which I won't reveal, though I've seen it happen many times, is more than simple tragedy. Octopus-like, it lays its black hand on every man on the station, air-crew and ground-crew alike, as well as some of the women who provide some of the keys to Truett's enigma of shadows.

Geoff Taylor's apparently casual off-hand, ironic manner of understatement—the pages at the same time liberally soaked in glycol, cordite, blasphemy, and beer—gives the novel a supreme and excellent authenticity.

★ ★ ★

Taylor is Australian. Nevil Shute is not, though he now lives in Australia and writes

much of his present fiction about that country.

He is in fact a British aircraft designer, engineer, and pilot who, like Wells, has had the dubious satisfaction of being correctly prophetic about the way some of mankind's scientific playthings will subsequently behave—or misbehave.

He decided to quit Britain some years ago and in fact flew away in his own Proctor after a considerable dust-up with the Income Tax authorities, who, being merely civil servants, could do nothing to allay his anger at being iniquitously and heavily fined by the Chancellor of the Exchequer every time he earned for that gentleman vast and much-needed sums in dollars.

Not surprisingly, Shute put his Proctor down in Australia and stayed there. It is, in fact, very much his sort of country. He is not a man who suffers stuffed-shirts gladly; he likes free air. One of his favourite themes, too, is the clash between man, riding his modern scientific, radar-trained chariots, and Nature's primitive space and force.

He deals with it again in **THE**



Flying men know fear...

RAINBOW AND THE ROSE (Heinemann, 16s.)—the title comes from a searching, tender poem of Rupert Brooke's—and his scene is Tasmania.

Shute, I should stress, by the way, is a highly misleading writer. It is my guess that he is probably responsible for more would-be suicides among more would-be writers than any other of my contemporaries.

I've no doubt they all think they can write like Shute. They can't. That nattering, unaffected, literary style of his is wholly deceptive. To attempt to imitate it is like trying to improvise on Louis Armstrong's trumpet when all you've played before is a pea-whistle out of a Christmas cracker.

Masterly

IT is, in fact, of its kind, masterly. It is slightly looser than, but every bit as compelling as, that of C. S. Forester. And it gives to *The Rainbow and the Rose* a constant, quivering slipstream compulsion.

A woman with a sick child on a remote Tasmanian hill-side radios for medical help to be sent by aircraft—this is very much the Shute world—but the pilot who flies in, 60-year-old John Pascoe, crashes and

fractures legs and skull. The subsequent attempt at rescue by a former pupil of his, the narrator, is as exciting as a sequence from Hitchcock. But it is also—wholly because Shute is not merely interested in the world of Proctors and Austers, but also profoundly fascinated by problems surrounding the spirit of man—much more than that.

It searches and lays bare the soul of John Pascoe, and also, in doing so, that of the narrator.

The same

"WHEN you come back—if you come back." The text is virtually the same, I suppose, wherever aircraft fly and there are men who love flying them and are at the same time afraid.

In its narrative skill, its technical detail and its human values, Shute's novel is quite admirable, but it may be that in that dusty, big-spaced Australian world of his, where aircraft run about on errands of mercy, there are to be found the last remaining themes of man pitting himself against the air.

Soon, perhaps, the automatons will finally take over from the spirit; and an astoundingly brief, vivid era will close.

NOW THE NEWEST NAME AMONG BEST-SELLERS SPEAKS HIS MIND ABOUT A MODERN TREND IN NOVELS

How I detest these spineless heroes

AND at least a hundred thousand others, am eagerly awaiting Mr. Graham Greene's latest novel, **OUR MAN IN HAVANA**. Or I was eagerly awaiting it until I read the publisher's blurb.

Mr. Greene's new hero, Warmold, is "a middle-aged Englishman whose wife has left him and who makes a precarious living in Havana as the representative of a vacuum-cleaner



recalling himself to London on urgent business.

Then at the last moment Anne wearies of the painter and begins to show a genuine interest in Denis.

Upset

When the telegram comes, she is, he sees, genuinely upset at the thought of his leaving. But go he must; though a pre-1914 hero a Dry Hero with a backbone, would either have torn up