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THE BOOK WINDOW

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A WELCOME TO THE BOOK WINDOW

By H. E. Bates

HRC

When I first began writing, in what are now regarded as the depressed nineteen-twenties, I used to travel up to London from the Midlands about once a week, by train, with ten shillings in my pocket and an enormous amount of hope in my heart. The fare for the seventy mile journey was five shillings return. My lunch in Soho, large and as I thought Bohemian in character, used to cost me half a crown. I spent a few pence on buses. With the remaining money I had enough for a cup of tea and a bun and perhaps even enough for a book, picked up in the cheap and amusing shops off Red Lion Square, to read as I went home in the train. For less than my ten shillings I had an interesting, profitable and sometimes exciting day.

All this was a quarter of a century ago—more or less, with a margin on either side that now sometimes seems like a hundred years. I do not know exactly what it cost me to live in those days, but I had a friend, also a writer and mainly, as I was, of short stories, who lived for thirty shillings a week and very happily. This was made possible largely because he was ingenious enough to buy himself a thirty-foot railway coach, all of three-inch teak and copper and brass and steel, for six pounds, and convert it into a home. As a writer his demands on life could hardly have been less, but in a few years, in his industry and modesty, he made himself a reputation.

What has all this to do, you may well ask, with the revival of a magazine in the autumn of 1952? What has a five shilling return ticket and a disused railway coach costing six pounds to do with the world of authors, publishers and readers of today? What, in fact, has this to do with *The Book Window*?

The casualties of war are limitless—largely, perhaps, because so many of them take place in peace-time. In the years between the wars the life of a young writer was relatively very simple. This was not only because, as I have shown, his material needs were cheap. It was also because the markets for his work were very diverse and very wide. All kinds of interesting doors were open to him and behind them sat interesting and distinguished figures ready to show sympathy with his work. In the days when I came to London on my five-shilling return ticket Mr. T. S. Eliot

was editing *The Criterion*, Mr. Desmond MacCarthy *Life and Letters*, Mr. Middleton Murry *The Adelphi*, Mr. J. C. Squire *The London Mercury*, Mr. Frederick Heath *The Bermondsey Book*—yes, they even had a magazine in Bermondsey in those days, publishing the work of an astonishing collection of writers, including Aldous Huxley, Siegfried Sassoon, J. B. Priestley, Conrad Aiken, V. Sackville West, A. E. Coppard, and R. C. Hutchinson, for some of whom it was their first appearance in print—and Mr. Leonard Woolf was with *The Nation*. There were many other magazines, some weekly, some monthly or quarterly, some semi-popular and some coterie, some issued on hand-presses in Bloomsbury back-streets, some in imitation of *transition*, an extraordinary quarterly from Paris, and many of dubious nature printed on what seemed to be disused wall-paper and, in the doomed shortness of their life, paying nothing for contributions at all.

All of these periodicals were open to the young writer whose work was fresh, ambitious and unsuitable for magazines of larger circulation who printed the work of Wells or Galsworthy or Hugh Walpole or Maugham or Conrad, the established writers of the day. It is true that the circulations of the smaller magazines were not wide and their editorial coffers were certainly never very full; but their reputations were enviable, distinct and collectively often powerful. In such magazines the names of writers like D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, Liam O'Flaherty, A. E. Coppard, Virginia Woolf, Sean O'Faolain and Rhys Davies had often made their first appearances. They were indeed—absurd, arty, affected and pseudo-Bloomsburyish though some of them were—an essential part of the literary circus, indispensable training grounds where writers could make their *debuts*, take falls and bumps, give an exhibition of their style and presently go on to tests and performances before wider audiences outside. All this was not something unique in the 'twenties. It was a part of things that had been going on since the 'nineties, and indeed before, and the days of *The Yellow Book* and its followers. It is probably true to say, indeed, that such magazines, though fewer in the 'nineties, often had still greater influence and power—for it has been said by literary men of long memory that *The Nation* of that day could make the reputation of a novelist with a column review, a feat which Wells certainly performed for Conrad by an exceptional notice of *An Outcast of the Islands* in the *Saturday Review* in May, 1896.

It is probably fair to say, indeed, that the established writers of one decade are often largely, though never, of course, entirely, the coterie writers of the decade before or the decade before that. Hemingway, in our day, is perhaps the best example of this. The coterie writer of the Paris 'twenties who submitted a masterpiece called *Fifty Grand* to nearly every publisher in America before its excellence was recognised by *The Atlantic Monthly* is now a world figure, with a reputation virtually resting, at foundation, on a series of little magazines. It is not long, either, since Mr. Graham Greene, Mr. William Saroyan, Mr. Dylan Thomas, Mr. Christopher Fry, Mr. P. H. Newby and other people of comparable reputation were similarly trying to make their voices heard in little magazines or their equivalent repertory companies. All writers must begin somewhere, and most of them inevitably begin not with a bang but, if I may take a liberty with Eliot, a whisper.

Even before 1939 the threat of war began to kill the whispers and the places where it was possible to make them. One by one they were drowned in the inevitable crash of chaos. Very soon *The Criterion*, *The London Mercury*, *The Adelphi* (in its old form), *Life and Letters*, *The Nation*, *The Bermondsey Book* were closed up, never to re-open. It is true that a few ventures, notably *New Writing* and *Horizon*, survived, but it was also clear that their survival was like that of prisoners kept on bread and water behind barbed wire. By the time war had finished with them there was nothing to be done but carry them away. A very lively venture from Wales, *The Welsh Review*, reflecting all the vigour of Welsh literary resuscitation, went with them. It is true that war, with the inevitable demand for "something to read" in every possible form, was responsible also for a sudden rush of little magazines, mostly of Penguin-pocket size, which were avidly read and even sometimes written by service men and women who needed the literature of escape or recognisable experience or of that curious and now outmoded variety, reportage. All these, with the possible exception of *Modern Reading*, have died. It may be that nobody laments them. I do. All of them were places where a young writer could make his first public whisper and it is beyond doubt, I think, that the second

most important thing for a young writer after writing his work is—ghastly truism though it may sound—to get it printed.

Perhaps after all, therefore, it is not surprising that the question asked so often in publishing circles today is not "Where are the new magazines?" but "Where are the new writers?"—as if, in essence, the two questions were not the same. The experience of Mr. Somerset Maugham throws some light on the scarcity of new writers. In a most generous gesture, three or four years ago, Mr. Maugham set aside a large sum of money from which, each year, two or three promising young writers were to receive awards that would enable them to devote more leisure to writing and to the widening of their experiences, preferably abroad. In speaking of young writers Mr. Maugham had in mind, as most of us would have done, people in the twenties and thirties. He soon discovered the necessity for a revision of his terms. For it seemed there were few, if any, writers in the twenties, and not a great many in the thirties. The forties had therefore to be considered as being young enough to qualify—which is probably why someone recently referred to me, at the age of forty-seven, as a young writer, a description that made me feel sad and bewildered and contemplative, rather than honoured in any way.

War, indeed, not only killed almost all the magazines where young writers wrote; it killed, sadly and inevitably, some of the writers; and it seems to have aged the rest, somehow, by twenty years. They survive precariously in a world of harder and harder economics. For war not only destroyed papers; it put the price of paper up; it made paper so scarce, at one time, that it was a hideously expensive luxury. The wages of printers and binders also went up. The costs of distribution went up. The cost of advertising went up as the space available for advertising went down. And soon it was inevitable that not only were magazines closing down but publishers (and librarians and booksellers) were asking themselves a hard, difficult and unpleasant question—"Can we afford young writers?" and the answer, inevitably and unpleasantly also, was all too often "No".

It is pleasant, at this depressing point, to record a remarkable paradox. It might well seem, after all its rising costs and depressing vicissitudes, that the business of book-publishing and book-selling—which is, in all senses the business of authorship—had sadly declined. In fact the year 1951 broke all publishing records. More than 18,000 books were published in the British Isles, or 1,000 more than in the year before or in the year 1937. The value of the books in 1937 was £10½ million. In 1951 it was £41½ million, of which nearly £14 million was in export trade as compared with £3 million in 1937. Thus, through fifteen years, all of them disruptive and two-thirds of them catastrophic, when the space for advertising books declined by at least a third and the space for reviewing them by perhaps a half, the value of books published in this country has increased fourfold—and all this in the face of the unpleasant and baffling fact that world illiteracy is increasing and the plainer fact that the century has given us, in film, radio, gramophone and television, four inventions that would all seem to discourage rather than succour the wider promotion of literature.

More books, fewer young writers—the paradox seems unaccountable. More people reading, fewer people, apparently, writing—can it be true? If so, how does it come about? The multiplicity of its causes is, I am sure, too intricate to go into here. But clearly writers need, aside from talents of some sort, several essential things: they need leisure for the formulation of ideas, for the complex processes of creation and re-creation and, as Mr. Maugham well recognises, the extension of experience; they need economic security at least as far as bread and butter and rent and roof are concerned; they need a platform for their work. Have they got them?

The answer, clearly, is not a satisfactory one. If there had been such a thing as an Atlantic Award for literature in 1925 a recipient of it could have lived and worked on it happily; today, if he is a poet, a short-story writer or even a novelist with an ambitious work in hand, he must supplement any award of its kind with a job. A poet whose volume of verse sells less than 400 copies—a good sale, by the way—has no other alternative. A prospective novelist who is also a journalist may find himself still forced to supplement his income, as in fact a young writer of my acquaintance does, by washing dishes at hotels or working in ice-cream factories at night. Neither of these men can do as young writers did in the 'twenties: stay at home, write their work at leisure, travel to London for five shillings

and find a ready market, talent always permitting, in the literary world of a great city. For, as we see, the market place has emptied and the cost of living in order to write in order to live in order to write has become an impossible roundabout on which few can afford the fare.

There is perhaps something to be said in favour of awards of money to young writers; and equally there is much to be said against them. But it is indisputable, to my mind, that the best possible sort of award to a young writer is a place where his work may be published and read. He must, in the most obvious sense, put himself in the public eye. Out of that comes his reputation, more satisfying, in final analysis, than any award. In the twenties and thirties a great many of the established and famous names of today were doing exactly that, I do not say always without difficulty, but on the whole cheaply, modestly and without the harsher economic distraction that haunts the young writer today. The conditions which made such writers have disappeared, and it is not surprising, after all, that fewer and fewer names have come out of this, our supposedly tougher generation.

All this brings me to *The Book Window*. It too, like the magazines once edited by T. S. Eliot, Desmond MacCarthy, J. C. Squire and others, was a victim of war. It was, of course, different from them and perhaps not so famous, but like them it was another window of the literary world that was blown out. I regard its re-glazing, as it were, to be a matter of great importance—for I hope, and I have some reason to think, that it will provide an example. Of all the great house magazines of publishing in London only *The Cornhill*, happily more distinguished and intelligent than ever, now survives. Once it was one of many. It is now clear that we badly need such magazines back; they are part of the essential life-blood of the aspiring writer. They are a guide to the publisher in search of fresh and promising names. It is also clear that the sort of patron that once supported them has gone down the long deep drain of war, its dingy aftermath and the by-ways of the welfare state. He will never come back. The only chance of our regaining the magazines which helped to breed so many writers of today lies, I think, with the great houses of publishers and booksellers, to which W. H. Smith & Son now gives, with the re-opening of *The Book Window*, a stimulating and long-needed example.

I therefore welcome the re-appearance of *The Book Window* very much. In it the publishers of it, themselves famous booksellers, will be able to devote more space to more books, and in a more influential way, than they did before the war. They will naturally hope also, by means of it, to sell more books. But I see nothing wrong with that. So do authors.