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FOUR NEW BOOKS BY

H. E. BATES

WHEREAS popular tradition steeps the lives of poets in romanticism, they are all too often in plain fact as juiceless as a stale biscuit; and if ever a poet mocked the popular conception it was A. E. Housman, of whom Mr. Percy Withers has written a short and charming memoir in *A Buried Life* (Cape, 5s. net). The story of Housman's literary career must be well known. The publication in 1896 of the customary slim volume of verse began a popularity, a legend and a silence that was not broken until 1922, when *Last Poems* finished, indeed it might almost be said repeated, all that Housman had to say. In the preface to the second volume he gave an indication of the immense emotional impulses by which *A Shropshire Lad* had been produced, and later, in the famous Senate House lecture, confirmed his belief that the strength of poetry arose out of the potency of its creator's physical reactions—"you feel poetry in the throat, in the solar plexus, or down the spine." The familiarity of these three points of physical emotion suggest what Mr. Withers would seem to confirm repeatedly throughout *A Buried Life*: that *A Shropshire Lad* was, at least partially, the tragic and bitter fruit of a sexual failure. Technically, Housman had no experience as a poet—"he had never attempted serious verse," Mr. Withers says, "until he definitely embarked on the *Shropshire Lad* poems"; and then "came the flood of '95, and a ferment so terrific that the nervous reaction was well-nigh insupportable, preyed on his mind so excessively that his dread of a recurrence forbade for years any further attempts, and to the end of his life could only be recalled with torment." It was about this time, perhaps earlier, Mr. Withers suggests, that Housman experienced the painful and secret love affair which was the source of "great and real troubles."

On the closeness of his personal contact with Housman rests most of the charm and value of Mr. Withers's book. Few succeeded in breaking down the external aridity and taciturnity of Housman's outward disposition; in Cambridge, during Housman's professorship, it was considered a crime even to greet him in the street. Yet a chance meeting during the Great War began for Mr. Withers a friendship with a man who once confessed that he "had never possessed but three friends, and all were then dead." In the author of *A Buried Life* Housman subsequently reposed the confidences, the near-confessions about poetry and his early life, the opinions on life and contemporaries, that are the substance of the book. As an assessment of Housman the poet, still less the bleak intellectual scholar, it is not surprising therefore that the book has little value. Its importance is that of a light shining on a character to which even the light of friendship appears to have been mostly inadmissible. What Housman's "great and real" troubles were we shall possibly never know; and it is equally possible that

BOOKS REVIEWED

A BURIED LIFE by Percy Withers (*Cape, 5s. net*).

THE SQUIRE OF WALTON HALL by Philip Gosse (*Cassell, 15s. net*).

MY NAME IS MILLION: The Experiences of an Englishwoman in Poland (*Faber, 8s. 6d. net*).

SOUTHWARD HO! by William la Varre (*Heinemann, 12s. 6d. net*).

Mr. Withers's brief, kindly, unaffectedly intimate memoir will be our only point of illumination.

Charles Waterton, eighteenth-century explorer, naturalist, taxidermist and country gentleman, was one of those English eccentrics who are at once the joy and vindication of the race. Left with a country estate and the income to enjoy it in comfort, Waterton decided instead to explore the remoter parts of South America, hunt bright-plumaged birds, investigate Indian poisons, and among other things ride on the backs of crocodiles. Unfortunately he chose to collect only birds of bright colouring, with a consequent loss to ornithology; yet the same passion made him forbid, at home, all gamekeeping, and inspired him to turn the lake on his country estate into a bird sanctuary. He preserved his bird specimens by corrosive sublimate and a laborious method of manipulation which has been the envy of taxidermists ever since; he never drank, never gave a dinner party, never let his name appear on a subscription list, and yet kept both open house and purse to every kind of person. He practised amateur surgery and "since my four and twentieth year, I have been blooded above one hundred and ten times, in eighty of which I have performed the operation on myself with my own hand." When he died, the birds are said to have burst out singing at his graveside. Mr. Philip Gosse's book on him, *The Squire of Walton Hall* (Cassell, 15s. net) is more interesting as an introduction to than as a study of a man who, as Miss Edith Sitwell has said, "was an eccentric only as all great gentlemen are eccentric." It is largely a sewing together of Waterton's own writings, and it lacks, both in construction and comment, the originality to which Waterton is entitled. Nevertheless, as an appetizer for Waterton's charms, it serves its purpose.

Each new phase of Hitler's advance across Europe produces a fresh battalion of books. It is too soon to expect them to be written in cold blood; it is too much to expect the calm factual assessments, inspired by emotions controlled by time. For this reason it is not fair to judge *My Name is Million* (Faber, 8s. 6d. net), the experiences of an Englishwoman during the Polish war, by ordinary standards. Six months ago this book would have appeared more terrible than it now does; now our own standards of terror have changed. The terror of Poland is very like the terror of a dream; in having the horror of Warsaw recalled for us we may be excused if it means less to us, for the moment, than the potential horror of London. The author of this book is the English wife of a Polish officer. Bombed, wounded, driven from Warsaw into Lithuania, captured by Germans, handed over to the Gestapo, imprisoned and finally released, she at last reached England via Scandinavia and Holland. It is only to be expected that the resultant record of her experiences should be highly emotional; it is clear that her hand and her voice were still trembling as she wrote this terrible, unhappy, and in places slightly hysterical book, for which there are no rational standards of judgment.

Finally, a voyage of escape, *Southward Ho!* by William la Varre (Heinemann, 12s. 6d. net), is one of those breezy, seductive accounts of South American adventure for which there seems, and quite naturally, endless public appetite. Mr. la Varre treasure-hunts in Yucatan, Guiana, the Panama Forest, Guatemala, Patagonia, the Andes, and the Amazon; finds gold, bananas, jungle-treasure, Indians, lost cities, and plenty of human interest. Hotted up, served with an excellent garnishing of pictures, this is the right dish for the travel-starved.