

JOHN O'LONDON'S WEEKLY

THE WORLD OF BOOKS : PLAYS : MUSIC : ART : FILMS

Vol. LXII No. 1,526

ON SALE FRIDAY, OCTOBER 9, 1953

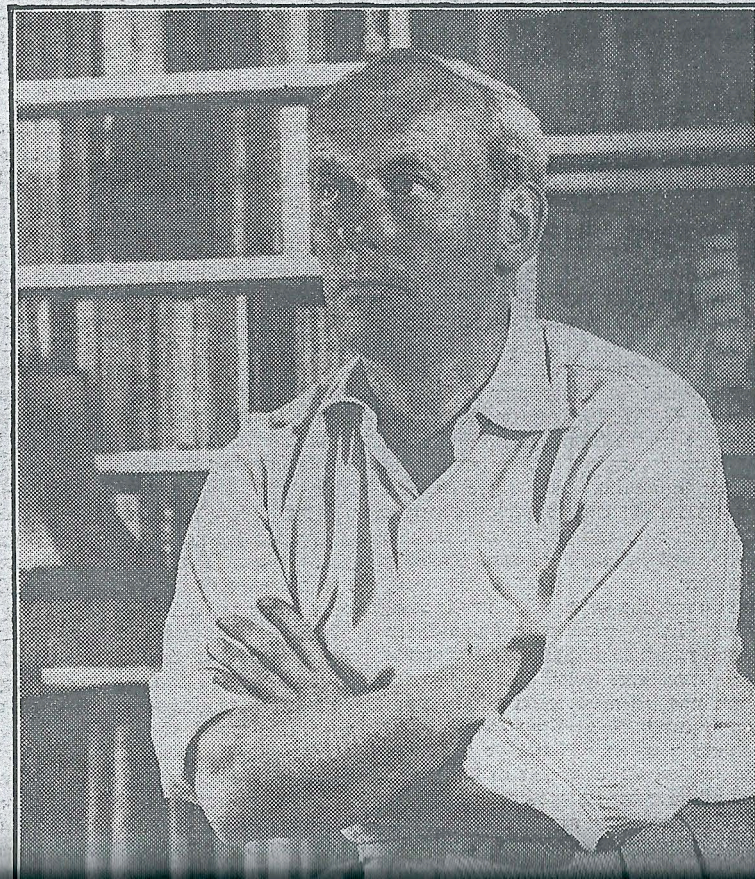
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IS THE NOVEL DYING ?

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MODERN WRITERS—2



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BETWEEN 1935 and 1950 I wrote and saw in print nineteen novels. Since 1950 I have written a volume of criminology, an autobiography, a pamphlet on religion, two books on science, and an adventure story for boys. But no novels of mine have appeared in those three years. I have friends, too, who have found the same sort of thing happening to them. Someone suggested to me the other day that the novel may be a dying form of art. Is it true?

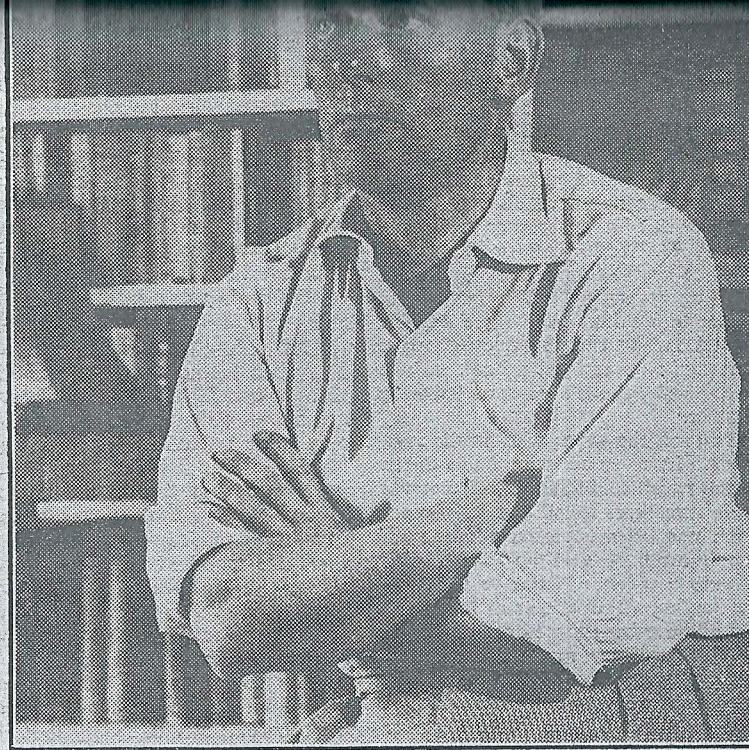
I don't suggest that my novels were masterpieces. I never claimed much for them. But they were fairly widely reviewed in many papers, including this one. And yet I have stopped writing them. I don't say that I shall never write another, though I don't think I shall write many more.

I am now forty-five years of age. In the past many writers found that their best period was from forty-five to sixty. Will my best period be during the next fifteen years, and, if so, what sort of books shall I write? Or, if I may broaden the thing from the

purely personal approach, are fewer and fewer writers to-day finding the novel worth while?

Well, let me look back for a moment at the time, nearly twenty years ago, when I was beginning as a novelist. Let me see who were the people writing then, the people whose work I eagerly anticipated. There was Mr. Somerset Maugham, there was Mr. L. A. G. Strong, there was Mr. T. F. Powys, there was Mr. H. E. Bates. Among writers of detective stories, there was Dr. Austin Freeman, there was Mr. Freeman Wills Crofts, there was Mr. Anthony Berkeley. (I restrict myself, purposely, to British writers; with the Americans it may be quite a different cup of tea.) Among writers of historical novels there was Miss Marjorie Bowen, there was Mr. Philip Lindsay, there was Mr. Rafael Sabatini.

OF those I have listed there are few now living whose most recent work (or so it seems to me) can compare with the work they were doing years ago. I know that Mr. Bates, for instance, has found a



Mark Gerson.

H. E. Bates. "He has found a new popularity since he broadened his approach." His latest book, "The Nature of Love," was published last month.

new popularity since he broadened his approach, taking the world, instead of a small slice of rural England, as his parish. But all the same, I feel (call this middle-aged stupidity, if you will) that *The Poacher* and *The Fallow Land*, and all the other magnificent pictures of English country life which Mr. Bates wrote in the 1930s, are far better books than *The Purple Plain* and the other novels which emerged from his war-time experiences.

And new writers, whose work I did not know twenty years ago? Who emerges there? Mr. Graham Greene, Mr. Joyce Cary—I cannot think of any others. And the only way, after all, by which the truly great novelist can emerge is via the publication of a vast number of

mediocre novels, from which the great book stands out. If publishers do not issue the mediocre, the real talent is unlikely to make its appearance.

Why, then, do not publishers issue the vast numbers of novels which they issued in the past? (Please don't quote statistics at me; I know that many novels are still appearing, but fewer first novels now strike publishers as worth a gamble.) I have friends who are publishers, and they tell me the reason.

In 1935, when I started, a publisher could issue a novel, print 2,000 or 2,500 copies, and break financially even if he sold as few as 1,500 copies at 7s. 6d. My own first novel sold, if I recall aright,

as few as 950 at that price. But, nowadays, at 9s. 6d., he has to sell about 3,500 or 4,000 copies to see his money back. With a biography or a travel book, on the other hand, he can charge 12s. 6d. or 15s. or more, and make a profit on a far smaller sale.

The public—which means you!—won't pay 12s. 6d. or 15s. for a novel; it will pay 18s. for a biography. And the novels which sell best are those most close to fact. Think of recent "best-sellers"—think of *The Sea Shall Not Have Them* and *The Cruel Sea*—and you realize what is happening in the world of books.

The result of all this is that the publisher who in the past published, say, a dozen first novels a year, now accepts a first novel only if, like Mr. Michael Hastings's recent *Death in Deep Green*, it shows a very real and authentic talent, which is likely to be built up fairly quickly into substantial sales.

DON'T blame the publisher for this. The average publisher is a business man. He cannot afford to lose too much money. Most publishers are ready to lose money on an occasional worth-while book. The occasional book which is obviously worth while will always find a publisher; but the rank-and-file novel, which may be the early work of a writer later to become the P. G. Wodehouse or the Edgar Wallace or the Somerset Maugham of a future generation, will probably fail to get into print. And there are few writers who can survive constant rejection, who can put a book on one side, and cheerfully start writing another.

You see, the writer who, in the past, might have produced half-a-dozen novels which sold 2,000 or 2,500 copies each, sometimes found that his seventh book was his masterpiece; but now it is only too likely that the seventh book of such a writer will not be written—for the first six (if he gets as far as six) will all have been turned down.

To sell ordinary, rank-and-file novels, too, is getting increasingly difficult. Why? Here I may not carry everyone with me; but I think that the answer is to be found in the television screen. Serious readers will, of course, go on reading. (Indeed, I myself have refused to buy a television set, because I feel that it might interfere with my reading.) But the reader to whom "book" means "novel," and light novel at that, has to all intents and purposes stopped reading. The cheap lending libraries, I am told, with their staple fare of romances and mysteries, are having a sticky time.

WHAT does all this add up to? Well, it may appear to some readers that I have here been concerned too much with the bread and butter side of authorship—but, after all, the author has to live. And if fewer and fewer novels are selling in adequate numbers, it surely adds up to the fact that fewer and fewer novels will be published. And if fewer and fewer novels are published, this will, in the end, lead to fewer and fewer novels being written. And if fewer and fewer



John Rowland.

novels are written, it means, in the current phrase, that the novel has had it.

I am not saying, here, whether I think that this is a good thing or a bad thing. I know that in the past many poor efforts at fiction achieved the dignity of print. But the more books that appear, the less chance there is of a worth-while book remaining in manuscript. Nowadays there are probably few good biographies or travel books or even philosophical works which do not find a market of some sort. Factual books still get into print; fictional books tend less and less readily to do so.

ARE we, then, living in an age when the novel is dying? I think that we are. From the Shakespearean age the verse drama declined and died, only to be revived in our own day by Mr. T. S. Eliot and his lesser imitators. It may be that the literary historian of the future will look at the nineteenth and early twentieth century as the age when the novel came to its noblest heights, and then declined. From Dickens and Scott to Wells and Somerset Maugham—that may have been the heyday of the novel. And the fiction of the future will then be largely the fiction of the cinema-screen and the television studio.

You may feel that that is a poor outlook. But let us at least be realistic. More and more of our most striking writers are turning to the films. Think of Mr. L. A. G. Strong and Mr. Graham Greene. They still write novels, it is true; but they write film treatments as well.

Years ago I pictured myself, a Cornishman, as the successor to Quiller-Couch, the interpreter of a new generation from the "delectable Duchy." But I now feel that Mr. A. L. Rowse's *A Cornish Childhood*, rather than the novels of "Q," may point the way in which my native Cornwall can best be interpreted. And the book of the future seems to me to be the biography, the book of interpreted fact, rather than the book of fiction. I may be wrong; but all the same I should like to know what others feel about it. Does the modern reader still turn to novels, or does he or she prefer books of non-fiction? Perhaps someone could tell me.