

was lucky, for these generally resulted in the prisoner being savaged by the fierce guard dogs whose meat ration was nine times as high as his own, or shot out of hand by guards entitled to a bonus for such displays of vigilance.

The work of Mr Jack Miller is also a valuable contribution. He has written a plain man's guide to Soviet life today—a task often attempted, but never before, in my fairly extensive experience, with such superb competence. It is a rare example of a fully authoritative 'popular' work based on many years of devoted study in this field.

## Brave lives

### PETER VANSITTART

*From a Biography of Myself* Robert Henriques (Secker and Warburg 50s)

*Journey from the North* Storm Jameson (Collins-Harvill 45s)

*Through Dooms of Love* Dorothy Burnham (Chatto and Windus 30s)

*The Vanished World* H. E. Bates (Michael Joseph 50s)

*Kontaktion for the Departed* Alan Paton (Cape 25s)

*The Thanksgiving Visitor* Truman Capote (Hamish Hamilton 21s)

One theme shared by this clutch of autobiographies is that of courage, at work against poverty, sickness, prejudice, self-mistrust or bad luck. Outwardly, the late Colonel Henriques, sportsman, farmer, author, radio star, much decorated soldier who helped plan the Second Front, seemed part of a golden, fastidious John Buchan élite. His posthumous, unfinished autobiography (edited by his daughter Veronica, herself a novelist of distinction) shows that, entwined like dark colours in a brilliant marble, were obsessions of cowardice and isolation burnt into him by humiliating schooldays. Incredibly he fell ill at affluent Rugby from near-starvation. Insecure, passionate, 'wanting to be like everyone else but more so', loathing inefficiency and complacency in himself and in others, he sought perfection like a grail. He kept a colder anger for unimaginative, bloody-minded officialdom, never as much at bay as it should be.

His story, not the work of a born writer but of one driven to ransack himself, sometimes desperately or clumsily, for self-expression and beyond, is sometimes funny, sometimes horrifying. It led him to swashbuckling private enterprise during the Casablanca landings, and encounters with Patton, Mountbatten, Churchill, in a career of radical smacks against normalcy, within a framework richly conservative.

Daughter of a rough Yorkshire sea-captain, Storm Jameson, too, was scarred with doubts though, from hardships and thrashing, moorland beauties and unpredictable kindnesses, she was to emerge a public figure with an indignant international social conscience and the tart vision, not of some glum or pretentious guru, but of a workaday campaigner. 'Hell,' says Sartre, 'is the others'—which is nonsense: nonsense prompted by a metaphysical vanity. Hell is five or six memories which are able occasionally to enter the intestines through the mind and tear them. Such lacerations induced a dislike of domesticity: a need for generosity of living, not only her own living.

*Journey from the North* takes her from

Whitby to London, through two marriages, early novels, glimpses of Prague, Budapest and Berlin between the wars. It traces the growth not of genius but of a sensitivity at once patient and restless, both appalled and fascinated by what must be destroyed. 'What I do not know, and cannot even hope to understand before I die, is why human beings are wilfully, coldly, matter-of-factly cruel to each other.' A sensitivity that, for example, comes to regard James Joyce's work as unconsciously helping towards Auschwitz and the cutting of children's throats. *Sir, you're hurting me*. This is scarcely fashionable, and occasionally Miss Jameson seems bitterly convinced that she is still being rejected, yet she challenges, with her view of humanity damning itself not from lack of masterpieces but lack of good people.

While Miss Jameson was suffering her first literary parties ('You know Peter Quennell, of course?'), Dorothy Burnham was one of seven, hungry in a small verminous room, without water and with a mural of bugs' blood. Her child's-eye view of London poverty conveys, better than most sociologists, how this can twist basic human deficiencies into spite, fear, crime. Once she was dragged to court by her stepmother for stealing a few strawberries from their own home. Threats abounded: 'My mum says you have a lovely face but you won't live to grow up.' Yet her book is not sour but lively. The street was a lucky dip: you turned up the ageing seducer or the muffin man; adults who mistrusted happiness, considered education as 'getting above one's station', spoke ominously or mysteriously of no-man's-land or Foxe's *Martyrs*, or showed futures in the fire and tossed a penny for five children rapturously to share. Here, too, no petty recriminations, but honest anger at so much human excellence condemned to waste.

H. E. Bates's father, a Midland shoemaker, was offered a teaching post at thirteen. His grandfather worked a backbreaking twenty-hour day without losing dignity or zest. Bates himself left school at sixteen for hack-journalism, clerking, the dole queue, while acquiring a more definite urge to write from such models as Stephen Crane. An Edwardian countryside is gracefully evoked, a reverie of harvest-dinners, wagonettes lumbering between resplendent hedgerows, of droning chapels, gas-lit street games, great houses, craftsmen dogged by hunger and tuberculosis. Few writers have a more exact feel for texture—of a flower, a face, a silence—and it is this that has value, rather than the cavalier judgments on modern life and other writers. Condescending to *War and Peace*, Mr Bates finds Henry James 'an elephantine bore', *The Tempest* 'the last messy infirmity of a noble mind', *Women in Love* 'almost beyond dispute the worst novel ever written by a writer of international repute', who lacked the imagination 'even to invent Mickey Mouse'.

In a simply written requiem for his wife, Mr Paton relives their marriage and their work for South African racial justice. To discuss, without sentimentality, love and goodness is a fair test of writing, and one which Paton, for all his honourably earned humanitarian reputation, too often fails, particularly in the passages addressed directly to the dead woman, which tend to read like sermons. Far better are straightforward accounts of his liberalising reforms in the tough Diepkloof Reformatory, and work for the unhappily defunct South African Liberal party. If only fine feelings of themselves produced fine books.

Sentimentality, insufficiently redeemed by irony, also invades Mr Capote's fragment, *The Thanksgiving Visitor*, which is both a window into his remote Alabama childhood and an affectionate tribute to goodness in the form of an elderly woman cousin who invites the school bully to a family feast. True to form, he commits a minor theft, though it is the outraged narrator who is made to feel small. 'You must be a special lady, Miss Sook, to fib for me like that', observes the delinquent—a line and situation suitable for any parish magazine. Doubtless accurate, it is not quite enough.

## Royal wraith

### JAMES POPE-HENNESSY

*Queen Alexandra* Georgina Battiscombe (Constable 50s)

The task which Mrs Battiscombe set herself in writing this fair-minded and workmanlike biography of the consort of King Edward VII turned out to be, to say the least of it, a testing one. The first requisite of any serious biographer is an adequate supply of original material upon his or her chosen subject. This in the case of Queen Alexandra is noticeably, almost deliberately, lacking. The private papers of Edward VII and of Queen Alexandra were, at their express direction, burned after their respective deaths. So were the doubtless innumerable letters written by the Queen to her Danish family—the resources of the Rigsarkivet at Copenhagen were thus found to be 'disappointing'.

Rather surprisingly, the Archives of the October Revolution in Moscow proved to contain forty volumes of letters from Queen Alexandra to her sister, the Empress Marie, but these are written in Danish, and are, like most surviving specimens of Queen Alexandra's wild and looped handwriting, hard to decipher; they are anyhow not yet available for study or publication. Only one volume, which figured in the Anglo-Russian Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert in 1967, could be consulted by Mrs Battiscombe and this 'contained nothing of interest'. Judging by the letters which her biographer does in fact quote, this latter phrase may be applied to Queen Alexandra's epistolary efforts in general. The paper holocausts at Windsor and at Sandringham would seem to have been Mrs Battiscombe's loss rather than our own.

Diligently, however, with great humour and good sense, Mrs Battiscombe has succeeded in presenting a lively and convincing portrait of one of the silliest but most endearing of all British Queens Consort. Lacking even the faintest tremor of intellectual tastes or interests, Princess 'Alex' of Denmark, on her marriage in 1863, brought to this country as her mental trousseau a fair knowledge of four European languages, the outlook of a delightful, thoughtless child and an outstanding capacity to charm. All her chief gifts—great beauty, grace, elegance—were of their essence ephemeral and can only, by posterity, be taken on trust.

It is a curious fact that, although her life contained so many elements of tragedy, including her eldest son's death, her husband's perpetual and public preference for other women, and her agonising, isolating deafness, we cannot at all see Queen Alexandra in tragic terms. Everything about her was in a minor key. Kindly and voluble,