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Testament of an Airman

The Last Enemy. By Richard Hillary. (Macmillan. 7s. 6d.)

By H. E. BATES

Unlike too many books of the R.A.F., both those written from the outside and those from within, this book has quality. Most pilots, unfortunately, cannot write; most writers, unfortunately, cannot fly. "The pilot is of a race of men who since time immemorial have been inarticulate" is a remark whose truth largely explains the mass of shapeless and repetitive stuff, to which pilots are now putting their names. The author of "The Last Enemy" can not only fly; he can also write. He is an articulate person interested in himself, his orientation, his fellow pilots, his class, the system under which he was educated; above all, perhaps, in the direction and attitude of his generation. The result is a book that does not appear to have been written by a person fresh from the sixth form whose competence is solely confined to describing dog-fights in the almost monosyllabic slangology of the R.A.F. "The Last Enemy," in fact, has an adult depth, candour, and detachment that are refreshing. Its dullest moments are its moments of action.

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The author was at Oxford, not quite twenty-one, when war broke out. Am I wrong in concluding that the time, the generation, and the place were not altogether admirable? "To our scholars (except the Etonians) we scarcely spoke; not, I think, from plain snobbishness, but because we found we did not speak the same language." To this it is necessary only to add a remark of the author's mother, addressed to him as he lay horribly burned, temporarily blinded, the victim of an appalling crash, innumerable operations, and the knowledge that he would probably never fly again. "She said, 'You should be glad this has to happen to you. Too many people told you how attractive you were, and you believed them. You were well on the way to becoming something of a cad. Now you'll find out who your real friends are.'"

I like that remark, a tribute to the mother big enough to make it; a tribute to the son big enough to repeat it. There are many other things, too, that I like about this book: the analysis of the flyer's emotions, the description of a crash over the sea, the picture of hospital, nurses and operations, the pen-portraits of friends, flyers, and (charming pages) of children; above all, of the complete picture of the young man of a privileged class "held together by a common taste in friends, sport, literature, and idle amusement," suffering a harrowing sea-change of democratisation until he is finally humble in his "right to fellowship with the dead."