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NIGHT-FIGHTERS

COVER OF DARKNESS. By Roderick Chisholm. (Chatto & Windus. 12s. 6d.)

By H. E. BATES

THE last war having begun with Hampdens and ended on the verge of jet propulsion, it seems reasonable to assume that the next, if it comes, may well begin with jets and end with pilotless aircraft: it will probably begin, of course, with both and thus end with remoter, fiercer, more furious fantasies. Already, therefore, Mr. Chisholm's book is itself a fantasy, a chronicle of man's problems, gropings and heroics, in what now seem to be the crudities of the piston age, a most intelligent and articulate book, charming and modest, that may well be among the last of its kind.

For every thousand of us who know of the Battle of Britain and all its implications it is possible, I think, that only a handful may be fully aware of the deadlier struggle of far more slender chances that succeeded it: the night battle of desperate odds in which we had a bare dozen squadrons of night-fighters, mostly ill-suited and ill-equipped, for the defence of the country. These were the nightmare nights of the converted Hurricane, the popular but sluggish Defiant, the Blenheim that could never catch up.

"As night fighters," says Mr. Chisholm, "we were wholly ineffective: we could not find the enemy aircraft, and even if we had been able to our Blenheims, though improved now by the removal of their turrets, were too slow to overhaul them. The radar was unreliable, the operators too inexperienced to use it. It took two to make an interception and at times some of the pilots could not contribute their share. Our aircraft were hard to keep serviceable, and sometimes we would fly them to a standstill."

Into this desperate world, the nature of whose remedies had necessarily to be so secret at the time, Mr. Chisholm takes us with an articulate readiness of expression that is rare. His chapters on the development of radar and the efforts of pilots to master its problems are all excellent. The story as he continues it into the final, subtler phases over Germany is neither emotional nor dramatic, yet it continually impresses and

satisfies. He is in fact one of the few pilot-writers I have ever read who is not crabbed by self-consciousness and who can admirably describe to the layman, with intelligence and without heartiness what his work is about and what it meant to him.

And in an age of flying where every man is rapidly becoming and indeed needs to be a specialist, it is significant, I think, that I find his most engaging description to be that of a flight in a Tiger Moth, of a day when "the mountains, so dominant to the earthbound, were beaten by this little flying machine"—a picture that I have no doubt his grandchildren and mine will presently be reading, in some anthology of the piston engine's quaint old twilight, on their way to the moon.

In France

FRENCH POLITICS: THE FIRST YEARS OF THE FOURTH REPUBLIC. By Dorothy Pickles. (Royal Institute of International Affairs. 25s.)

By ALAN H. BRODRICK

MRS. PICKLES has given us a fully documented, factual survey of French politics since the Liberation. She indulges in little prophecy, but politics, as she remarks, are becoming ever more divorced from economic realities. This study makes it clear that it is doubtful whether, even if there were no tax evasion, the French could carry the burden of extensive social services, of modernisation of equipment, of capital investment, of rearmament and of a costly colonial war which eats up well over one million pounds a day.

It may once have been true that the French could do without government better than most peoples; but changed world conditions demand a coherent and far sighted foreign policy more insistently than most Frenchmen seem to realise. No one can read Mrs. Pickles's book without seeing more clearly than before how things really are with a country whose fate concerns each one of us in the Western world.