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# R.A.F. ESCAPES

ESCAPE FROM GERMANY. By Aidan Crawley.  
(Collins, 16s.)

By H. E. BATES

THERE is much in the literature of wartime escape that irresistibly recalls the flavour of the stink-bomb, the rag and the antic ingenuities of "Stalky & Co."; but a good part of Mr. Crawley's book, typical of the manner by which he has brought to television something almost judicial in journalistic commentary, is less a narrative in episodes than a steady and careful analysis of escape as an art, an obsession, a duty and a kind of high-spirited dedication to the religion of sheer cussedness.

He draws his material exclusively from the R.A.F., at the same time confining his narrative to escapes made from Germany, where he himself was an Air Force prisoner for four years; and though he deals in some detail with individual and collective escapes, giving historical accounts of such camps as Stalag Luft III and Oflag XXI B., the analytical part of his book is, I think, far more interesting and valuable than the longer, narrative section. His talents do not lie in the field of narrative; whereas his capacity for sifting, weighing and presenting the evidence is, as televisioners know, about as admirable as it could be.

## Understandable

NO war ever provided a fighting force with the particular problems in escape, psychological and otherwise, that the second world war presented to the R.A.F. based in this country, and it is perhaps not surprising that, for a long time, flying men found themselves ill-fitted or only half-fitted to meet their emergencies. There was, I suppose, scarcely a flying man in the entire R.A.F. who did not at some time go into action fortified against the evil hour by some sort of talisman, charm or mere rabbit's foot, yet when I once asked an R.A.F. ex-prisoner of war why he had never troubled to equip himself before take-off with a well-prepared and convincing disguise for possible use after bailing-out I received only a stare of pained surprise and the admission that "None of us, old boy, ever believed we'd have to bale out."

The attitude was typical but perfectly understandable. No other fighting force in history had "ever found itself taking tea in the calm summer air of an English village at four o'clock, fighting in a highly specialised theatre of its own at half-past and returning to take a telephone call from an inquiring girlfriend at five."

Fighting in this strange theatre, men often found themselves, as Mr. Crawley points out, with little or no experience of how to behave when forced down in enemy territory, continually failing to realise that the best way of escape is to avoid being captured, that the greatest hope of

escape is immediately following capture and that hope of escape can only diminish with time. A most startling conclusion to be drawn from Mr. Crawley's book is that if the merest fraction of prison camp ingenuity, resource and sheer inventive skill had been applied to avoiding capture perhaps something less than 15,000 R.A.F. prisoners might have found themselves behind barbed wire. It is a melancholy thought, too, to be faced with the cold fact that in spite of all tunnelling, Trojan horses, faked passports, moles, catapults, disguises, dummies and every kind of trick thought up by every kind of brain, fewer than thirty R.A.F. prisoners in permanent camps in Germany ever succeeded in reaching neutral territory or this country.

Against this small success we must set the much larger number of those who lost their lives while trying to escape, including the fifty officers who were infamously murdered after the mass escape from Stalag Luft III. It was Mr. Crawley's job to act as interpreter to the British Senior Officer when summoned to hear from a very ill-at-ease Camp Commandant the news of this massacre, though what effect that meeting had on the author Mr. Crawley gives us not the slightest clue.

The judicial manner, indeed, serves him poorly here and elsewhere. Of his own escape in 1943, when he reached the Swiss frontier after tunnelling out of Schubin, he permits himself, for instance, little more than the luxury of a footnote. Hardly anywhere indeed does he indulge in the personal, warming or amusing touch. The result is that his book, perfectly admirable in all phases of documentation, impresses but does not inspire. Cool and colourless as vellum, it will, I feel, sit worthily on the shelves of the future like another piece of official history or a transcription of one of Mr. Crawley's own visual documentaries. No one will ever possibly mistake it for the *Escapers' Guide to Better Times*.

## Thanks to the "Peelers"

THE RISE OF SCOTLAND  
YARD. By Douglas G. Browne.  
(Harrap, 25s.)

FOR several years before his death, the late Ralph Straus had in preparation a detailed history of the Metropolitan Police. His friend Douglas Browne took over his researches when he became too ill to continue, and the result is this admirably informative volume which must surely become a standard authority.

Peel's Police Act of 1829 was genuinely revolutionary. The success of the "Peelers" owes much to their first joint commissioners.