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ERIC WILLIAMS
from a portrait by
Stanley Spencer

NEW POETRY

UNION STREET. By Charles
Causley. (Hart-Davis, 12s. 6d.)
STILL AND ALL. By Burns
Singer. (Secker & Warburg,
10s. 6d.)

By JOHN PRESS

MR. CAUSLEY is a master of accomplished, melodious verse, liberally spangled with vivid, unexpected adjectives. On the whole I prefer him when he is celebrating the war at sea, and British matelots on the prow, or portraying a family whom the Welfare State has failed to tame:

Old Man Winters likes his
beer
And his missus ran off with a
bombardier.
Grandma sits in the grate
with a gin
And Timothy's dosed with
aspirin.
The glittering ballad-like poems,
though skilful and pleasing, are
often sophisticated exercises in
affected simplicity:

Night the Negro lays his
suzers
On the lily-breast of day,
or rollicking drum-and-fife
extravaganzas that do not
succeed:

Watch your thermometer,
Slater,
The patient refuses to die.
The dizzy germ and the
fading sperm
Can't keep his powder dry.

But Mr. Causley is never dull,
drab or mudy. Indeed, con-
temporary poetry could do with a bit
more of the ardour and the
gaiety that burn and fizz in the
best of his poems. "At the British
War Cemetery, Bayeux" proves
that, when his theme demands it,
a genuine poignancy and strength
are not beyond his range.

Concentration

IN most of his shorter poems
Mr. Burns Singer writes in a de-
pressingly flat, opaque style, ap-
parently by deliberate choice, for
there is no question here of
bungling. Unlike the majority of
his contemporaries, he displays
his virtues more emphatically in
poems of some length, his most
considerable achievement being
"The Transparent Prisoner," a
hard, unsentimental, horrifying
narrative of the second world
war, illuminated by the steady
glow of poetic imagination.

The most ambitious poem in the
book, a sequence of fifty "Son-
nets for a Dying Man," is not
entirely successful. Mr. Singer
is capable of lapsing into near-
gibberish:

Draw, and because we can't
reach it
It comes here searching us if
off the scent
or into the tongue-twisting
alliteration of your very mind is
drawn.

Apart, its thoughts taught
tortures, turned to trash.
It is, however, this very concen-
tration of thought and of
language that distinguishes the
finest portions of the sequence.
Such a line as "I knew my skull
had crossed bones with the
womb" gives a taste of his quality
which, visible in Sonnets XXIII,
XXIV, XXXIV, XXXVIII, XLII
and L, preclaims itself most
clearly in the sestet of Sonnet
XXIII:

What words can say to me the
words have said
Out there where nothing
happens since you are
No longer there for things to
happen to
And there's no way of telling
what is true
You cannot find me any
image for
Our knowledge of our
ignorance of the dead.

After 'The Wooden Horse'

COMPLETE AND FREE. By Eric
Williams. (Eyre & Spottis-
woode, 16s.)

By H. E. BATES

THROUGHOUT all the
sheep-and-monkey chorus
about the novel, its sup-
posed decline and the alleged
demand by the public for a
semi-documentary kind of book
to take its place, no one has
troubled to spare a thought for the
authors of these same semi-docu-
mentaries and the problem of
what happens to them when
eventually the furious bonfires of
adventurous experience die down.
When there are no more Nazi
prison-camps to escape from and
dam-busting is all over where do
you go from there? What do you
do, in fact, as Eric Williams him-
self puts it, with the problem of
what to say?

It is only a few years since Mr.
Williams found himself riding on
the tail of a dazzling comet of
success: there wasn't a reader in
the country who hadn't heard of
"The Wooden Horse." But comets,
as Mr. Williams well realised, are
rare events in the sky and wooden
horses don't happen every day;
and because the author of "The
Wooden Horse" happens to be a
man of character and intelligence
as well as courage he was quick to
face his rude and uncomfortable
dilemma with chilly reality.
"Although I wanted very much to
go on writing, so far I had not
found anything in post-war life
worth writing about. I have not
the essential spark of imagination
to create a novel and in the
hiatus after the emotional excite-
ment and purpose of the war
peace-time life seemed too insigni-
ficant to be recorded."

THE confession has in it some of
the sadness of the crack miller
who realises that his day on the
track is over, the actress who
knows her beauty is fading and the
world champion heavyweight who
grasps that the time has come at
last to keep a pub. But there is, in
fact, much more to it than this,
and my liking for "Complete and
Free" springs not so much from
the book itself, most entertaining
though it is, as for the purposes
behind it. Among other things
Eric Williams reminds us that the
war was fought, as, of course, wars
always are, for the apparent pur-
pose of ensuring that all sorts of
freedom didn't disappear.

The fact that many of them
have disappeared annoys him
rather a lot and he feels bound
to say, as do many of his con-
temporaries, that this isn't what
he fought for. Nor does he
like the Welfare State very
much, and he certainly didn't
fight for that either. What he
fought for, astonishing though it
may seem, was to be complete and
free, and this is what, at the heart
of it, his book is about. "It seemed
to me that it was worth while," he
says in a modest and typical way,
"putting my point of view."

THE book I ought to make clear,
I is neither angry nor sermonis-
ing about these things, and may
be read purely for the pleasure of
accompanying Eric Williams and
his wife on their adventurous
journey in an ancient tourer
across France, Italy and other
parts of Europe, where on one
occasion they were exceedingly
lucky, I think, not to have met the
fate of the Drummonds. This
journey has since been followed
by another that has taken them
behind the Iron Curtain, and from
the resulting book, already in pre-
paration, I have no doubt that we
shall discover what complete and
free, at least to some people in
Europe, really means.

If it is as brisk, intelligent and
entertaining as this one, however,
Eric Williams need nurse no
further qualms about his future as
a writer.

CYRIL CONNOLLY is on holiday