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**The Red Page**

**BRIAN JAMES'S STORIES**

To re-read the Brian James stories in *The Bunyip of Barney's Elbow* (R.P. 11/7/56) is to be charmed and delighted again, perhaps more than when they were appearing so prolifically in "The Bulletin" a few years ago. I know no Australian writer who is so rewarding on a second, and even on a third, reading; the rich texture of his writing undoubtedly is one of the reasons; and the aptness of his terse descriptions of scene or character, the shrewdness of his philosophy, the humor that is engrained in almost every paragraph.

But there is something more which is peculiarly the property of Brian James, which arises from his angle of observation and has been described as his "legendary quality."

Urban readers may not notice any particular significance in the fact that most of his men characters are bearded or that on the rare occasions when they work, they cart wood or water with a one-horse drag; though they could be expected to sit up when Reid and Parkes are referred to as contemporary politicians, and Queen Victoria as the reigning monarch. The odd fact about Brian James is that the period he writes about in nearly all these stories is that of his boyhood and early youth.

The adults who came to see his father must have been observed with a quite precocious penetration; their appearance, their manners, their dress, their speech. Then, for up to 40 years they were savored in his mind, so that when they were finally presented they, and the things they did and said, were enhanced by half a lifetime's reflection.

Yet, in the stories, though the reader is constantly made aware of the maturity of the author's mind, the romantic boy still has his influence. There is an Arcadian simplicity about the life on the small mixed farms which is vastly different from the harassing mechanised, scientific farming of today; there seems to be no limit to the time the farmers can spend in talking, drinking, quarrelling or just plain idling. The nagging wives and the shiftless husbands, the ferocious old men and the bitter, deserted women never repel, but delight with their uniqueness and their exactness. There are tragedies in the stories, but they never depress the reader; they are treated as the exciting events in the life of a sensitively aware youngster, but now so remote that time, the great healer, has had his opportunity for his beneficent work.

Quite a lot of murders are committed in these pages; the victims, in all but one case, so richly deserving their fate that the shrewd but humane old police-sergeant makes only token investigations, then implicitly conveys his warnings to the suspects that this sort of thing should not be done too often. This naturally adds

enormously to the pleasure of reading the stories; in Cookabundy so many of the things one so dearly wishes would happen do happen; formal justice is displaced by poetic justice, and every reader should be grateful for that.

There is, however, one story which is not set in this aspect: the last, and in many ways the best. It is about a bus-trip from a high plateau down to the plains. A motor-bus, surprisingly, and not a Cobb and Co. coach; and one of the passengers gives the reader a shock by having two sons in the "Japanese war." It takes quite a lot of adjusting to accept the fact that it is the recent World War II that is meant. Yet the outlook remains the same.

The road is dangerous, the driver ill, the bus a ramshackle vehicle with defective brakes. Nearly all the passengers are in a state of apprehension, or have left families at home in that state; there is a sawmill-worker dreadfully injured in an accident, and a weeping family which has been put off its farm by "the Banks."

In the hands of most writers it would be a tragic and harrowing trip; yet, characteristically, Brian James makes it richly humorous. Yet not because of any lack of human sympathy; he is, in fact, the most compassionate of men. It is just that, in his philosophy, human disasters are inevitable, but the effects are transient. Time seems to be telescoped for us, so that we know the injured mill-worker

**PHILOCTETES**

Stones, everywhere a stone; the heven rock rose out of centuries of fern and ice; moss grows thick with water where the shock of time stares through a mountain's broken face.

The island of his pain, this plateau land is scrawled across with lichen's poverty. The blind pool in the cracked rock out-stares the sky's sterility.

O rotting wound of pain and root of anguish where the heart's entwined, lichen sucking life out of a stone; an aching, exiled, tortured mind

turns inwards on the centre of its pain, turns outwards to the island of its fear; Moss grows on roots of rock and rain; but thoughts are birds that won't fly near—

"to hold and fondle in these hands of blood and feel my hands alive and warm . . . fold over the thin wings of a bird. . . Stumbling in the lacerating storm"

he wandered through his days among the ferns, the thorn, the lichen, in the wind and rain, and searched the crevices of rock, for bulls sleeping in his *oid natio*.

TASMANIA. VIVIAN SMITH.

will get better and have a great time "on compensation"; while the dispossessed farming family will find jobs in some town, and soon learn to speak with contempt of their former hard and anxious life.

Strangely enough, there are some people so ungrateful as to complain about a lack of plot or a disregard for form and balance in Brian James's stories. Judged superficially, there might seem to be some justification for this; in fact he has assured me that he never concerns himself with the technique of storytelling; he just begins where he thinks he ought to, and keeps on writing until he comes to the end. Yet there is a rightness and an artistic inevitability about nearly all his stories. They have the quality of tales told around an old-fashioned open fireplace, to knowing and appreciative listeners, who know that it is the reality and the characters that count in a story, whose interest demands that the form be fluid and adaptable to their moods, and who would be offended by anything so artificial as a contrived plot.

It is a fact, too, that most of his stories are taken direct from real life; and it must be admitted that to present

real life with all the charm, humor and sympathy of Brian James is as close to artistic perfection as a writer can hope to approach.

E. O. Schlunke.

**"The Tree of Man"**

What on earth is one to make of a novel so massive, so impressive, so baffling and in some respects so maddening as Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* (Eyre and Spottiswoode)?

For quite a number of years readers of "Happy Valley," which Patrick White published abroad, and which had small circulation in this country, have been speaking in awed tones of the influence of James Joyce and the possible arrival of a major Australian novelist; and now here he is in a book which the New York "Times" described as "a timeless work of art," the New York "Herald-Tribune" as "one of the finest novels to have come out of Australia" and the New York "Post" as the work of "the Hardy of Australia."

These are large words; and "The Tree of Man" is, in more than one sense, a large book.

There is no question whatever about the immediate interest of the book; the instantaneous appeal—it will have to those readers who are accustomed to find their entertainment in the higher reaches of the contemporary novel, whether by Hemingway or Charles Morgan. Complete with floods and bushfires, it is obviously an attempt (if another!) at the Great Australian Novel; and if we have had that before, at least we may be grateful that Mr. White has not felt obliged to go to Macquarie and the convicts for his fiction once again, nor yet to the earliest pioneers.

Instead, very ingeniously reminding us that we are still pioneers—and that at a time when so many of our critics are trying to persuade us that we all live in cities and the land is of no significance—he goes back no further than to a few years before the First World War and moves with his characters up to some undefined period which we may as well call the present; though World War II doesn't come into it.

What he has done, essentially, is to show how settlement begins in Australia, today or in the past, wherever there are still gumtrees to be chopped down. His pioneer, Stan Parker, goes into the bush with an axe; and gradually, over the years, the settlement of Durilgai—which could be, say, 40 miles from Sydney—grows up around him; the postmistress, whose husband was an obscure artist of genius and, for no particular reason, hanged himself on a gumtree; the wealthy retired butcher (very severely handled; both for his wealth and his trade) who built a mansion in the neighborhood and saw it destroyed in a bushfire; the vague-witted Doll Quigley with her idiot brother Bub, whom eventually she removes with a carving-knife; the uproarious O'Dowds, who drink and quarrel mightily and who have never bothered to get married; and others. By the end of the novel most of the pioneers are dead; carrying on into the future are the settlement, the grandchildren, and such trees as the axemen have left in the wild gullies, "putting out shoots of green thought"—by which Mr. White presumably means the continuing tradition of the land.

And at the same time, by following the life-stories of Stan and Amy Parker from birth to death—through courtship and marriage; the difficulties of married life unexpectedly complicated by Amy's adultery with a stray commercial-traveller; the rewards and disappointments of rearing a family; the griefs and trials of old-age—Mr. White has written a kind of essay on the doom of man. It is significant that his title is from Housman; it might just as well have been taken from "The Vanity of Human Wishes." His cheerful dirge is not quite fair enough to be universal, for all children do not turn out so lamentably as the Parkers, whose boy is shot in the end in some low dive in Sydney, while his sister is pale, mean, asthmatic, snobbish and childless; but it is sufficiently warmed by compassion, humor and steadfastness not to be unduly gloomy; and, for

practical purposes, it is near enough to the truth.

So the novel is simultaneously, and in a synthesis everywhere harmonious, a picture of Australian man on the Australian earth, and of the common man on the common earth anywhere. It is an ambitious project and it is carried through, in many respects, triumphantly.

Why, then, is the novel baffling? Why is it, often enough, maddening? Why, relating it to the great stream of classic literature instead of merely to the better-class novels of the day—Mr. White is impressive enough to deserve this compliment—do doubts arise?

His style is, for one thing, wholly bad.

At nearly all points of action when it is vitally important that he should

**HARRY AT SUNRISE**

The blaze of morning wakes the bird Domesticated in a tree, Though in the valley window-blinds Rise like eyelids after sleep But do not blink. And Harry finds That evil's left each hump of hay.

The fire is lit, and so he climbs A rock, to see the mountains wake; And there he sits. He cannot say Why grass and leaves have eyes of dew That soon dissolve within the day. But thought, that drifts like chimney-smoke,

Is lost in air. Now Harry's face Becomes a hollowed cliff of stone. He shuts his eyes and night returns. Though with a private moon and stars. To rocks and creeks and troubled ferns— And in this dark they seem his own.

VICTORIA. R. A. SIMPSON.

be clear, he is foggy. When Stan is rescuing the beautiful Madeleine from the bushfire at the butcher's mansion; when Stan discovers that Amy has been canoodling with the commercial-traveller; when he decides to connive at the deception; when, years later, he nearly shoots himself at all these critical points action and motive alike are obscured.

Then the old man who was walking along stubbornly on slippery feet slipped suddenly. He was an old scarecrow with wooden arms and a gun waving at the end of one of them, and the ridiculous little box of ferrets with its airholes bumping and bouncing on his shoulderblades. As the sky tilted he pulled the trigger of the gun. It all happened so quickly that it was scarily slow on his mind. The sunset was still seeping slowly past him, hot and cold, material and fearful, as he lay on the ground and realised that he had just failed to shoot himself.

Did Stan try to commit suicide? Was it just an accident? Was it, in the Freudian sense, an accident-on-purpose? Why should the reader have to read the paragraph three times to find out what has really happened; and then, perhaps, have to go on to the end of the chapter, pages later, to be quite sure; or perhaps never be sure! And why, on the other hand, when Mr. White is not trying to be obscure, must he be so painfully, so baby-clear, as this?—

The man who sat in the cart got down. He rubbed his hands together, because already it was cold, a curdle of cold cloud in a pale sky, and copper in the west. On the air you could smell the frost. As the man rubbed his hands the friction of cold skin intensified the coldness of the air and the solitude of that place. Birds looked from twigs, and the eyes of animals were drawn to what was happening. The man lifting a bundle from a cart. A dog lifting his leg on an anthill. The lip drooping on the sweaty horse.

The paradox about this kind of experimentalism, obviously borrowed from the tough-guy school of Hemingway, is that it always sounds so nambypamby—arty and affected.

The eyes of what animals, incidentally, would be drawn to the

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