

may be questioned; it is a just qualification of the story as he has told it.

Ivo THOMAS, O.P.

APE AND ESSENCE. A Novel by Aldous Huxley. (Chatto & Windus; 7s.6d.)

This book is described by the publishers as a cautionary tale: a picture of the post-atomic-war age. But the caution is robbed of its power, partly because the picture itself is unconvincing, repellent without being plausible, indignant but not coherent; partly because the survivor and representative of the old order is hardly more dignified or attractive than the grave-looting, devil-worshipping, sex-obsessed new-agers. And this is a deeper reason than the technical failure of the book for wishing that it had never been published. The positive side of what Mr Huxley has had to say in his recent works is so vitally important that it is a tragedy when he ruins his case by revealing in ever deeper colours his *horror humani*, his disgust for humanity. If he could see and love the greatness that so often lurks beneath the squalors of humanity, and so could pity the squalors, he could help humanity out of the morass; as it is, those who look to him for guidance in the search for sanity may well be excused if at this point they say to themselves, If this is the attitude to mankind which this search for God instils in us we are better advised to stop—or at least to wait until Mr Huxley for his part has begun to search for man.

GERALD VANN, O.P.

MEN AND WIVES. By I. Compton-Burnett.

MORE WOMEN THAN MEN. By I. Compton-Burnett. (Eyre & Spottiswoode; 7s.6d. each.)

The novels of Miss Compton-Burnett are appearing in a uniform edition, which should make it possible for readers unfamiliar with her work to estimate its importance as a whole. No contemporary writer of fiction has received praise so generous. 'The purest and most original of contemporary English artists', says Miss Rosamund Lehmann; 'one of the most original living writers', says Mr Edwin Muir. And yet she is scarcely known beyond the narrowly circumscribed world of the critics.

The first clue to her novels lies in their titles: *Brothers and Sisters*, *A House and its Head*, *A Family and a Fortune*. and those under review. She writes of family life, of the elaborate life of natural loyalties against a social background that is, one supposes (no dates intrude) Edwardian. The stuff of her fiction is at first sight trivial: in *Men and Wives* the complications in a village centring round its two principal families, in *More Women than Men* the conflicts springing from the life of a staff in a girls' school—but conflicts that relate to husbands, wives, brothers, sisters. Indeed what happens in her novels matters very little, though sheer melodrama—a murder or a suicide—can enter as coolly as you will. The

genius of Miss Compton-Burnett lies in her immense intelligence in the ordering of character, exempt as it is from the tediousness of descriptive build-up or elaborate action. No novels contain so little comment. They are almost wholly conversation-pieces. And what conversation! Her wit is sustained with a confidence and invention that are unequalled in any recent English writing.

For those whose tastes are corrupted by the realism of so much English fiction, this almost timeless, airless investigation of the human creature in its primary setting must mean difficult reading. It is like living in high altitudes when habit has made you native to Tunbridge Wells. Certainly no staff-room ever talked like Mrs Napier's; no family exchanged volleys comparable to those of Lady Haslam's. The conversation is mannered, antique almost, but it penetrates and ranges with an irony and devastating analysis of motive and mood that can only be compared to the higher flights of fencing or the cadenzas of a virtuoso concert player. Quotation cannot hope to do justice to a process that is continuous, in which each word is measured and yet depends on the amazing manipulation of the sentence, itself dependent on another, and the whole a unity perfect in proportion and unflinching in effect.

Miss Compton-Burnett has deliberately chosen a small world and has made it unmistakably her own. One may think that Henry James, the earlier James and not the Old Pretender, has influenced her. That is true, as it must be of almost any serious novelist who came after him. But for wit and perception, sophistication and intellectual awareness, it is impossible to think of any novelist so original and so satisfying.

ILLTUD EVANS, O.P.

REPORT OF THE OXFORD UNIVERSITY DRAMA COMMISSION. (Oxford University Press; n.p.)

The Oxford Drama Commission was appointed in 1944 for the purpose of investigating the study of the drama in American Universities in order to recommend the best means of furthering that study at Oxford. The investigation was financed by Sir Alexander Korda.

American universities have made some quite outstanding contributions to the study of the Drama, among the most important being 'The Drama of the Medieval Church' by the late Professor Karl Young (of Yale), and they may be credited with some first class dramatists like Thornton Wilder and Eugene O'Neill; but the States would seem rather a limited field from which to make conclusive decisions as to what should be done in Oxford. Moreover the Commission does not appear to appreciate that the art of the theatre is primarily concerned with the author and actors on the one hand and the audience on the other, that *where* these meet is of little consequence, provided there be reasonable comfort and good acoustics; and that every gadget, property and spot light not particularly provided for in the script, however valuable to the