

AMBLE 9

(EVERY ISSUE MORE IDENTICAL THAN THE LAST)

31st OMPA MAILING

Perpetrated by ARCHIE MERCER of 434/4 Newark Road, North Hykeham, Lincoln, England. (E&OE) Emanating from within the Caravan in the Shadow of the Malleable Ironworks. Yngvi is a Louse. A MERCATORIAL PUBLICATION

Starting this issue on the 31st of December 1961, the last day for many a long year when the year reads the same either side up, with as usual

THE SHAMBLES

reviewing the 30th Mailing and anything else vaguely related thereto lying around.

A BRIEF INDEX OF THE FANZINES PUBLISHED BY ME (Terry Carr)

You should've been crafty Terry, and

put this out as part of a more varied zine - as I did with the "ARCHIVE" complex a few years back. That way, if anybody wants to throw the list away as being of minimal interest, they'll have to throw the whole thing away.

SUWAYYA 1 (Andy Main)

Everybody talks about the John Birch Society, nobody ever says anything about JB himself except by omission - 'twould seem he had no hand whatsoever in founding his own society, and (I rather suspect without knowing a thing about it) wouldn't altogether approve of the way his name's bandied about nowadays anyway.

Members I Have Met: specifically, the entire British roster with the exception of Fred Hunter and the British Museum bloke, plus Don Ford and Ellis Mills. Sorry I haven't longer to devote to this subject. (Oh yes - and I've spoken to Jim Caughran on the phone). On the waiting list, I've met only Pat Kearney (male I may as well add) and Dave Hale.

UNICORN 4 (George Spencer)

Your remarks to Lynn Hickman re CONVERSATIONS 15 re the (attempts to end) the encroaching of state power upon the rights of individual citizens raise a cheer from this direction. I'm not thinking specifically in American federal/state terms of course, but generally. Individuals are the ones who should have rights, any delegation to higher authority should depend strictly on how that authority looks after the individual's rights. My opinion is that a central authority, under full nationwide publicity, tends to look after them better than a local authority.

VIPER 4 (Bill Donaho)

The Fate of the Donaho Beard sounds like a sort of tragic object lesson. I don't quite dig this discomfort-for-the-first-month-or-two bit though. When I used to shave, I used to do it in the morning, and my face used to feel tender until afternoon. If I'd shaved before going to bed, bed would have been torture. So at best I only swapped one discomfort for another. As it happened, the only part of my face that felt at all uncomfortable with the beard - and that only after it had grown out a certain way -

was the area immediately around my mouth, by nature more mobile than the other bearded parts. But on balance it was always an improvement.

If Stephen Crane's alleged "poetry"

Is poetry,

Then, surely,

This also is poetry.

Personally, I don't think either of them qualify.

Damn it Bill - I thought it was you that first said Oliver Anderson wrote satire, I (having sampled same) replied I found it simply a glorious extravaganza, even though satire did prove to be there if looked for deliberately. This discussion seems to have turned itself inside out or something.

Re Avram Davidson commenting on me commenting on Vaughan Wilkins (or possibly Avram commenting on you commenting on me commenting on Wilkins - something like that, anyhow). His point about the Recurring Character-types is well made, except that they sometimes tend to flow about a bit. Avram omits to observe that in the full cast there are two Beautiful Girls, one who seduces the Young Boy and the other who gets him in the end, whereas the Lady Who Eventually Gets Married to The Gentleman of Advancing (not advanced please, advancing only) Years is usually somewhat older than the more juvenile element. But in at least one case the Lady Who Eventually Gets Married to The Gentleman OAY doubles as Beautiful Girl who Seduces Hero, in others ~~the hero~~ is no older than the Young Boy becomes at the end of some of the longer works, displacing the Gent OAY altogether, and so on. One further similarity I notice is what I call the Battery Syndrome - Wilkins puts several assorted characters into a small enclosed space and keeps them there, or in the neighbourhood, for several enthralling chapters at a time.

OFF TRAILS Dec 61 (Bruce Burn ex officio)

Good Man Bruce, restoring the Roles Numbers to OFF TRAILS.

UL 4 (Norm Metcalf)

I could be technical and suggest that a monapan who produces not a sausage is not treating his apa as his No. 1 apa, otherwise you've got a point or something. Place/membership information was also of considerable interest. The multiapans are not as numerous as I'd thought, particularly when one considers that some of them have three or more apas on their string.

Not "wide", no. "Wild". And this wasn't exactly what I meant, but if you went around calling yourself "Norm Metcalf Metcalf", even if it was your proper name, I'd consider that you were overdoing it, too.

Pleasant reviewzine, anyway.

UL 5 (same guy)

If I'd noticed there were two of these in the pile I'd have saved a couple of lines by reviewing them together. As I didn't, I proceed to waste a couple of lines (or more) by explaining how I might otherwise have saved a couple. Your bland statement in the middle of P.3, "Some training instructors didn't allow us to read newspapers", croggles me no end. I fail to dig the reasoning behind this sort of thing. As above, plus other stuff of interest.

TRIAL & ZEUTHEN AAGAARD (Owen Hannifen)

Not very inspiring text I'm afraid, even the second one seems a bit forced and/or feeble, but I love that "Zeuthen Aagaard" title. Does either of it mean anything?

ENVOY 3 (Ken Cheslin)

Nice and meaty. Praiseworthy artwork from all sides, too. Those pics of Ethel at the back could have been

almost drawn from life. I've never seen her in either nursing-dress or highland-dress, but if she was to appear in either she could hardly fail to appear much as you depict her. ETHEL FOR TAFF (or indeed vice versa) I need hardly echo of course.

Supernatural elements in THE KING MUST DIE - it's a bit more than just a talent for predicting earthquakes. The hero converses - or fancies himself conversing - with Poseidon whenever he goes into the act. He, as the author presents him, believes in the Greek pantheon implicitly and entirely. And to me as I read it, the belief seemed to lie rather in the story than in the character - if you see what I mean. I did read the RING GIVERS, but I was comparatively disappointed in that one. I'm not entirely sure why - perhaps because in some ways it goes too far the other way. For instance, the spectacle of a hall-full of warriors afraid to give collective battle to one escaped serf, however Donahoe the latter's proportions, is somewhat ridiculous to say the least. So come with me backwards in time. Backwards to

ENVOY 2 (Dick Schultz)

Apart from the size of paper used, one has not the slightest difficulty in accepting these as two issues of the same zine. Same rambling contents, same excellent artwork (though the running strip at the page-bottoms gets a mite confused towards the end), same not precisely inspiring but certainly acceptable reproduction. Yes, it's Prosser's subject-matter I dislike and not his capabilities, true. But from what I've seen, the two are virtually inseparable. It's got now that I feel I couldn't trust him not to draw a repulsive picture, however good it might be technically.

I'm in favour of having kept John Roles, he's earned a bit of indulgence by past performance. I wouldn't, if asked, necessarily say the same about any given other lacktivity case though. This sort of thing's best played by ear.

On P.16, about 2/3 of the way down, it says about nurses: "After passing a Regency exam if they move to a different state blah blah blah." This reminds me of a film I once saw - I forget what - about a doctor who proposed moving from New York or somewhere to Florida. Some other character pointed out that he wasn't licensed for Florida. "I'll pass the Florida exams" our worthy replies. This all looks uncannily like beaurocracy gone mad to me. Besides being irksome for the individual concerned, it is also anti-social in that it tends to restrict the natural movement of labour. This AMA that seems so powerful, I'd have thought it'd have done something about that sort of thing by now, nation-wide as they are.

PACKRAT 3 (Jim Groves)

Short and (as the saying says) sweet.

MORPH 25 (John Roles)

Mind you, I had to look at the bacover to determine whether that second figure was a 5 or a 9. Helen Kennedy is I believe Douglas's wife and Peter another relation, all mixed up with the English Folk Dance & Song Society and all performing on one or more instruments. Edgar? Am I supposed to have heard of him?

What I term a strong melody is one that has a powerful effect on me, whereas a weak one has little or none. There's a third class, that repel me - strong I guess, but the wrong sort of strength. I'm unable to think offhand of any of these latter, but the best demonstration of "strong" and "weak" I can think of is to give examples from one composer. Take Stephen Foster. "Oh Susannah" and "Swanee River" are very strong indeed. "Beautiful Dreamer" and "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair" are pretty damn weak. What they lack in common tends to defeat me, but that's how they affect me.

ZOUNDS! 6 (Bob Lichtman) Naturally, one doesn't expect two Americans and a New Zealander to comprehend all the ins and outs of Britannic political geography. For the rest, interesting nattering that I don't feel moved to comment about.

ERG 10 (Terry Jeeves) So now the principle is to be: Send the one you most want to lose as TAFF winner, is it? Or are you just slightly mixed up with it all, Terry?

P. 10 - HERBERT Strang, surely. P.16 - Englishmen, not only Yorkshiremen, are reputed to like cricket. Shake, mate. I don't either. Most games I dislike because they are games. Cricket I dislike even more because it's a silly game. In any ordinary game, the object is for the best side to win. In cricket, however, it isn't so far from the truth to say that the object is for the most sporting team to let the other side win. (Go on you cricket fen - howl!).

Some years ago I used not infrequently to fall back on the Sexton Blake Library when I was stuck for something to read. I haven't sampled it lately, because I so seldom am nowadays. But I did just catch a bit of the new "Sexed-on" Blake setup. Tinker was not gone altogether - he was simply made respectable, and as "Carter" still worked for the firm. But Blake's own attitude (and age!) had certainly changed. I remember he had two personable females on his staff. The elder and more experienced of the two - probably the "Paula Dane" that Glynn mentions - was considerably more than just a secretary to Blake - I forget if it said outright that she was his mistress, but it certainly implied it. And the younger one - probably the "Marion Lang" mentioned by Glynn - lost her honour for the first time in one of the stories I read, all done in aid of the firm, and she ended up virtually rarin' for more of the same. That'd be a firm to work for!

SOUFFLE 1 (John M. Baxter) Well if I looked like Crowley then, I look like Crowley with a beard now. Only I somehow can't imagine him (as I imagine him to be) (complicated this) in my sort of a beard. "Laura" - never having been impressed by the tune (rather a morbid one to my way of thinking, lightweight morbid sort of) I've managed to keep the words at arms' length. So I'm afraid that musically we jest ain't with each other.

paraFANalia 9 (Bruce Burn) I found the story "Worlds Gone Hence" easy to get into, the background was well-developed and interesting enough. But it fell rather flat at the finish. The character has been complaining that suicide doesn't work with him, and then contrives it (or has it contrived) by such a simple means as collapsing over a hot stove. And the "no kid of mine was going time travelling" doesn't seem to have any particular relevance either. "Kid of mine" maybe. Time travelling, howcome? The narrator hasn't been time travelling as well, has he?

The Burn travelogue still of much interest. Is that supposed to be the end, or are you going to give your angle of the arrival in Britain?

SUWAYYA 2 (Andy Main) Interesting but nothing I can pick up right now, sorry.

CCON/PHENOTYPE (Dick Eney) I enjoyed the conrep, and the candid admissions of things that didn't go exactly right deserve special mention I think. The middle of the last page of conrep was slightly hilarious. As for the rest, it was all of much interest, particularly the perspective on the Alamo. I was somewhat taken with that "Biglow" versifying, too.

SCOTTISHE 26 (Ethel Lindsay) Full of assorted interest as usual. I see

that Arthur's now in his snowflake period. (Those little verses are largely masterpieces in their surrealist way, too). Sid Birchby on vanished glories, he's right you know. How often, when in a heatwave (we have heatwaves at times) I've sweltered on the glassed-in top deck of a double-decker bus and yearned for the Good Old Days (that I can just remember) when open tops were the thing? Not so popular in snow, rain etc maybe, but oh how wonderful to be able to travel across town on an open top deck in the sunshine! Now, I think open-top buses are restricted to running along the sea-front at a few coastal resorts. Otherwise, you're shut in, like it or not.

Likewise on the underground. I think all the London underground trains have automatic sliding doors nowadays. No more can one stand by the open door and be cooled by the breeze, as I was in Hamburg just after the war. Even the good old Brussels trams have automatic doors now. Safer, undoubtedly. But not my type.

There's even been in certain things a falling-off from wartime standard. Not officially, mind you. Take pencils. Just ordinary pencils. Ever tried to write a novel with one? I have. In hot weather (again!) the paint-work slips and slides all over the place, it's the very devil to hold for long. In wartime, pencils weren't painted, and your sweat soaked into the naked wood. Result - a steady grip. Come the end of the war, they started painting the things again. All of them. Therefore putting the cost - and ultimately the price, natch - up. Producing as they did so an article that, for my purposes, is inferior to the wartime one.

Oh yes - thank you Roy Tackett for the light on your marinity.

MAILING COMMENTS 8 (Dick Ellington)

The cover, for a start, should be distributed around everybody in any official position whatsoever throughout the world. It's so utterly absolute.

Whether Moondog considers himself a celebrity is surely beside the point. I consider him one. If I was to meet him socially, it might well be somewhat different, but as it is, I'd just as soon write to (say) Tom Lehrer, or Harry Truman or somebody.

The IWW bit is long overdue, I've long been wondering just what you were occupied with. Now some of the missing picture is filled in, I know how it started. I'm by no means clear just how important it is in America or the world today, though. Maybe that'll follow in due course. For the time being, this much is acknowledged with thanks.

I'm afraid I can't say I'm altogether 100% solid behind you though Dick. The "preamble" is so full of holes that I don't quite know where best to start picking 'em, much of the statements only make sense if one's equipped with an entirely different set of acquired data to start with, than I am. To be obvious, people are basically selfish, and a social setup such as this would fall down right away on that count. Some here and there may not be so selfish as others, but the norm is.

VIPER 5 (Bill Donaho)

Allegedly "fiction" or not, the "confession" ties in in so many places with the truth as generally known that it makes one wonder at precisely which point fiction does take over? Like the very early Berry pieces.

"Requiem for Astounding" in this issue at last begins to catch up with my own effective reading life. The June 1943 issue (or rather its BRE) was one of the earliest SF zines I met - previously they'd been very few and far between - and I rate it as being as good an issue of any zine as I've ever come across. Particularly the "Gallegher" story, and for a slightly different reason de Camp's

"Pelagic Spark". Uh - CLANG! I mean Boucher's "Pelagic Spark" of course. Introducing de Camp as a character, despite the zine's disclaimer that all characters are strictly fictitious.

Can Alva possibly be persuaded to do the same for UNKNOWN when he finishes this run?

OMPAssible SCIENCE FICTION (Alan J. Lewis)

Quite frankly, I haven't read this and don't intend to. I'm not cribbing at its existence this time as I did with OMPALog, the items look as if they very possibly may have quite a bit of quality about them. But I just can't bring myself to go looking for it. Which is at least as much my fault as yours, if it's any solace. Sorry mate.

WHICH HAS BEATEN the deadline. Said deadline being midnight, this 31st of December aforementioned. At which time I aim to be finishing off the year's filing. And all the above OMPazines can therefore go away as c.1961 rather than c.1962. Hooray.

NEW YEARS AFTERTHOUGHTS

Re the story in AMBLE 8, I may as well mention that I let it end where it did because that seemed the most artistic place to leave it. If I'd been writing it for myself, of course, I'd have got him out of it somehow. ENEY - according to my researches, German blood has no umlaut. TERRY CARR - please don't take my remarks on your checklist as trying to belittle your achievements in fanzine publishing. It certainly is a wonderful thing to have published all that.

OH DIDN'T HE RAMBLE

THE COLUMN WHERE ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN BUT SELDOM IF EVER DOES

OUTLINE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY PART 2

Last quarter, we left our hero, protagonist and narrator (me) on the train bound for Scotland and the army. The date, the 17th of June 1943. The time - well, read all about it at your leisure. Look out army, here we come.

PART TWO: MERCER THE SOLDIER

The calling-up papers said that I was to report by 10.00 or 10.30 am or something, or as soon thereafter as I could make it. Detraining at Lanark Station some time in the late afternoon, I was glad to see that my interpretation of the deadline was shared by plenty of others. Each carrying a little suitcase, we swarmed out on to the platform where a waiting NCO marshalled us outside, lined us up in column of threes, and away we sent. I was in the middle of the front three, as we swung in not very professional style out of town and along the road to the barracks. Most of the way it was lined with greenhouses - Lanark is the tomato-growing capital of Lanarkshire or something. Then the racecourse loomed up on the left, and the barracks lay just beyond that. The working-day being over, we were shown to our ~~bedrooms~~ ^{bedspaces}, issued with bedding, fed, and turned loose within the barrack area for the night.

The following morning, reveille was sounded according to the Scottish tradition by a bagpiper followed by a bugler with the "translation". Having break-

fasted on what I remember as lumpy porridge and army tea, those of us who had not had time to be kitted-out, documented and the rest were duly dealt with. Then our civilian clothes were packed in the suitcases, which were sent off to our homes, and that was that. We were in.

The unit we were with was a Primary Training Centre, and we were on the rolls as members of the General Service Corps, to which all recruits were normally assigned for primary training. (The GSC had been created for precisely that function). The permanent staff - instructors and such - were mostly members of Scottish infantry regiments, largely of course Englishmen. Not, however, nearly so English as the recruits were. In my company (there were three companies, each representing an intake and separated by fortnightly intervals) there was only one Scottish recruit, and I think there was something funny about him - he'd already dodged a previous order to report somewhere else or something. He came from nearby Glasgow. All the rest of us were from England - mainly the northern parts thereof, with a sprinkling from the south coast. I lived in an outer suburb of London, but my school had been evacuated north, so I think that I counted with the northerners when they sorted us out prior to call-up. We were all a few months over eighteen.

The primary training course lasted six weeks. It comprised more or less what was to be expected - square-bashing, infantry drill, care and feeding of our rifles, and that sort of thing, helped out here and there by sundry intelligence tests, general knowledge tests, and simply tests. After a day or two we were given the army's standard set of inoculations. As these were known to result in swollen arms and general debility, we were given the afternoon off and told to make ourselves comfortable. This we proceeded to do - the beds were pulled down, assorted kit spread out on and around them, and for once the place looked really pleasant - as pleasant as a large room furnished with nothing but sixteen or twenty double-deck bunks and as many lockers could look, anyway. Then the sergeant or sergeant-major or something blew in to have a look at how we were going on, and really did his nut. I was ever so disappointed.

After the first week-end, we were allowed out of barracks. It was a blazing hot summer, and shirt-sleeve order was unknown, which didn't help of course, but I suppose it was something. Lanark is a small Scottish town with not much to recommend itself to you unless you like that sort of thing. There was one cinema - possibly two, I'm uncertain - and a forces canteen where we could buy thick tomato rolls. The best part about Lanark is the surrounding countryside - in those parts, the "bonnie banks o' Clyde" really are bonnie. Better still though, to me, was the music. The centre had a small pipe band on the permanent staff, and a large regimental band from somewhere in the neighbourhood used to come and play for us frequently. So day by day we were regaled with massed music, mainly of the British traditional variety which is one of my two acknowledged favourite varieties (the other is traditional jazz, which I had not then met, nor would for many a long year). Of course I just lapped it up. It went a long way to making the life tolerable.

Here I may mention that, coming as I did straight from boarding school, I found the transition to military life less abrupt than I might otherwise have done. I never actually liked the life - but it was infinitely preferable to school nevertheless, even the comparatively free-and-easy one I'd just come from. The army does treat one as an adult - even if one strictly isn't as yet.

As soldiers went, I was far from what they'd have preferred. My drill and general soldierly bearing was frankly pretty feeble. With two or three more from the platoon, I was singled out for special extra treatment, drill-practice etc. I'm not sure whether or not I ought to be proud of the fact that I was the one who responded most favourably to this - in fact when the company paraded on passing-out before some local brass-band, I was the only one of the awkward squad who was allowed to be present, the others were told simply to get lost. This, to me as I then was, was sweet egoboo indeed. So I blanched up and duly paraded before the massed band. (A pipe band and an ordinary wind band run in double-harness). That blanching-up was a chore I never came to appreciate. Apart from the paradox of its name ("Blanco" is a trade-name. Originally white, it now comes in all colours required by any of the services. The usual army shade was known as "khaki green No.3"), it has nothing whatever to recommend it. Just in case anybody hasn't met it, I'll mention that it comes normally in block form - the block is wetted and the resultant mess smeared all over web equipment and allowed to dry. When dry, it gradually flakes off and gets all over everything. This process is euphemistically referred to as "cleaning" equipment. However, it can get more complicated than that. The stuff is not, it seems, good for clothing, so the surfaces that face inwards are not to be treated. This is straightforward except for the web belt itself, where it turns in on itself, so part of the "outside" actually faces inwards. Yet the whole outside, including the turned-in parts, was normally blanched. I pointed this out to one of our NCOs, but was told to do what everybody else was doing, which right or wrong was the proper way.

Anyway, there I was marching proudly past the reviewing-stand to the tune of "Kiss Me Quick My Mither's Coming". Then the six weeks was all over, and we were posted away to various regimental training establishments for further instruction. Together with a fair number of others, I was detailed to go to Catterick, on the Yorkshire moors, to join the Royal Corps of Signals.

One of the first things I discovered at Catterick was that I was no longer a private, but a signaller, the Royal Corps of Signals being one of a number of military bodies that carry their own private name for private soldiers. Other well-known specimens are "gunner" in the Royal Artillery, "sapper" in the Royal Engineers, and "trooper" in the cavalry. Personally, I like this idea - being something other than plain "private", even if everybody knows full well it means the same thing, still makes one feel subtly more important, and the individual corps rank helps back up the esprit-de-corps feeling too. To jump forward a bit, I remember once in Edinburgh myself and an assorted gaggle of other soldiers - mainly Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, the private rank of which incidentally is "fusilier" - were just rolling out of our nissen-hut when an NCO buttonholed me and addressed me as "signaller" - and my heart really leapt with egoboo.

I was assigned to a five-months' course for training as Operator, Wireless & Line (or "owl" for short). This meant being able to operate any military wireless or telephone or telegraph equipment, and was largely a matter of being fluent in morse. Several of my ex-mates from Lanark were on the same course, or the "keyboard and line" (ie, mainly teleprinter) course run by the battalion across the parade-ground. Initially, all those in my squad were eighteen-year-olds, though some of the squads consisted mainly of men of around forty - everybody in between had already been accounted for. The first evening at Catterick, my squad was taken up to its barrack-room in the evening and told that we would find three biscuits on each bed. This I assumed to be by way of a late supper, and I was disappointed to find that in army parlance a "biscuit" could also mean a square of

mattress.

I had two particular mates in that squad - one of them a dedicated Congregationalist from one of the south coastal resorts who had come from the same platoon at Lanark, the other an Irish (or part-Irish) Roman Catholic with a fabulous surname. We three were always together, and on afternoons off used habitually to take walks all over the district whilst hotly debating religion the while. Sometimes an equally dedicated Church of Englander named Bennett (Bennetts I Have Known !) joined us, but generally speaking we remained a trio. The argufying was most instructive, and in particular it taught me that beyond a certain point it is impossible to debate religion with anybody whose mind is not more open than the holding of religious views will normally allow. Through it all we remained great friends, and I haven't a clue where either of the other two may be nowadays - which just shows or something.

Making due allowance for the fact that most of the countryside was either militarily built on or used for driving tanks over, I liked the district. The nearest town - just on the edge of the camp, which covered a wide area - was Richmond, a lovely little place situated dramatically on the heights overhanging a river. It was very armified of course, being the principal recreation-centre for the camp, but still a lovely place. There were several canteens where one could sit and get outside tea and cakes and things, and no less than three cinemas which (unlike Lanark) were open seven days a week. In particular I fell in love with the castle, which stood on the most dominating position above the river. One day myself and the part-Irishman went a bit too far, and started climbing where one shouldn't. The walls were full of otherwise inaccessible chambers and things, and it's a crying shame that they should remain thus. We were seen though, and ordered out of the castle for our exploratory zeal.

The main ingredient of the course, as I have mentioned, was morse. On the first day of tuition, they got us in the classroom and started a tape going at us by way of a demonstration. This, we were informed, was playing at 20 words a minute, and by the end of the course we would be able to read it with no trouble at all. We all groaned in disbelief, and started in to learn. I picked it up extremely quickly, and was one of the foremost morse-readers in the squad, including those who had already used it in the Scouts etc. If morse-reading was all that had been required of me, I would have passed that course with great credit. One day, a month or two after the start of the course, I was out on a scheme - myself, the part-Irishman and a wireless-set in the back of a small truck. It was his turn to operate the set, and he was sitting there frantically taking down morse letter by letter whilst I, sitting beside him, was reading the sounds off mentally just as if the operator at the other end was speaking them - and the part-Irishman was no slouch.

Unfortunately, morse the pity, there were other things to learn. Sending morse, as distinct from receiving it, was one. I wasn't manually dextrous enough to send as fast as I received - though my sending was passable. Less passable was my grasp of the theory and practice of instrument-maintenance. Less passable still was my general military bearing - for one thing, I was the slowest runner of them all, and always had been. When the entire school had been sent out on a massed cross-country run, boys two and three and four years my junior had streaked ahead of me with the greatest of ease. But in one way and another I was not living up to the authorities' expectations of me, and I landed up before the trick

cyclist.

About half-way through the course we were given the intermediate trade-test, mustered as assistant owls with a small consequent increase in pay, and sent on our first leave. My parents seemed to be terribly proud of me - I suppose I did look fairly imposing in those days, young, with no more stomach than a belt could hold in satisfactorily all round, in a neat best battledress with the blue-and-white flashes at the shoulders and the regimental dress-cap. And I was Serving My Country in the approved fashion. Then back up north again to the grind.

All of a sudden, out of the blue, a message came that the CSM or adjutant or somebody wanted to see me. It came a bit late actually - Tony Mercer the crooner (whatever happened to him?), who was an instructor in the same training regiment and sometimes took our squad, got the message first and endeavoured unsuccessfully to report instead. When I finally got there, the blow fell. I was to be taken off the course and posted forthwith to the holding company attached to one of the other training battalions. So in full marching-order with kitbag perched agonisingly atop my large pack, I staggered down the road to the holding company lines.

The job of the holding company was to carry out camp fatigues while awaiting posting elsewhere. Being medically A1, I was assigned to heavy fatigues - less-healthy types clanged for spud-bashing, cleaning and such, I found myself mainly labouring around the coal-yard. The Loos coal-yard to be specific, the various "lines" (groups of huts, or occasionally of barrack-blocks) around the camp being named after World War I battles and things. I hated, loathed and detested the Loos coal-yard. If I've ever been in a depressing place, that was it. It wasn't so bad going out with the lorry. That could be fun. The coal was shovelled in loose, and then taken off to the married quarters together with a handcart, half a dozen tubs and some shovels. Each house was then allowed so many tubsfull, which were carried round to the back on the handcart. A concomitant of this run was cups of tea from friendly batwomen. But waiting about in the coal-yard, in company with the equally depressing permanent garrison of the place, was murder.

One day I went farming. This was OK - even though the job in hand was threshing, and one's eyes were constantly full of flying matter, I found it thoroughly enjoyable, and there was extra pay from the farmer. I could have gone on that job while it - and my stay - lasted, but I had put in for an interview with the company commander to ask him what was going on and couldn't I get back to the wireless operators' course, and somebody else got picked for the gang instead. Then there was the time I did a 24-hour guard-duty on the criminal block at the military hospital. But mainly it was the Loos coal-yard for me. After a month maybe though, my posting came through to a Selection Centre at Edinburgh. So I said goodbye to my old mates back at the owl training joint, and duly headed back to Scotland.

A Selection Centre was a place where soldiers were reallocated. Some of them got their tickets from there. One's stay normally lasted some six weeks, mine were spent during the months of November and December 1943. Those who were sent there came, of course, from all branches of the army, and the Nissen hut I was detailed to (not recommended at that time of year, incidentally) contained mainly Northumberland Fusiliers. These were for the most part pretty useless

types - which is not to be construed as reflecting upon the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, no doubt every regiment had its quota of these, the ones with which I was afflicted just happened to be Royal Northumberland Fusiliers. They were middle-aged and thoroughly browned off with life. Their previous sojourn had been at what passed for their regimental depot - a joint they referred to as "The Skewles", apparently a set of council or church schools (boys, girls, mixed infants) that had become vacant when the Tyneside schoolchildren were evacuated elsewhere. They hadn't cared for "The Skewles" either. I may be misjudging them, but I don't think they'd really be happy even in civvy life. Or all that useful. As it was, they just mooched up and down the Nissen hut, up and down, smoking and complaining. They really got on my nerves.

I was glad to get out of that hut - I'm not sure of the circumstances, but I remember that a splinter group of assorted soldiery somehow became established in a previously deserted hut (still Nissen of course) that belonged to nobody - none of the companies claimed it. In fact nobody even knew we were there, so for several days we were able to loaf in complete idleness.

This was facilitated by the fact that the authorities never knew quite what to do with us anyway. The intelligence tests and general knowledge tests and aptitude tests and everybody else's tests that we all had to go through again certainly didn't take up six weeks, and there just weren't enough fatigue duties to keep us all occupied. They had a habit of falling large squads of us in, leaving us standing easy for quarter-hours and half-hours at a time, marching us futilely from one end of the camp to the other and back, standing us easy again while they tried to find something else for us to do. In that weather, to be left standing easy in the open was no joke. (For the uninitiated, "Standing easy" means that one stays in ranks with feet astride, can talk, smoke etc or do anything else in reason so long as one doesn't - officially-move one's feet).

There were guard duties of course. The Centre had two guard-rooms, a survival of a previous regime under which the premises had been occupied by two separate units. And nobody could think of any better use for a second guard-room than to mount a second guard there. As the only thing worth guarding was the back way into yet another unit's lines, this doesn't seem all that coherent to me, but then this was the army. On my turn to mount night-guard on this second guardroom, I did what seemed to be the favourite procedure by adjourning to the adjacent boiler-house during my period of duty, undoing my greatcoat, sitting down and reading. There the CSM caught me in flagrante delicto, and I trembled in my dubbed boots. I needn't have bothered though - it turned out that the guard hadn't had the Guard Orders read over to them properly anyway. Thus, as nobody had actually told me I wasn't to make myself comfortable in the boiler-house and read, the matter was allowed to drop.

The encampment was at that time of the year a sea of mud. As it was situated on uneven ground, some of the huts had what constituted in effect trenches round their hinder ends, and with sundry post-supporting wires that seemed to be trailing everywhere, at night in the blackout to get from one place to another was tantamount to a battle-course. One could go downtown to Edinburgh of course in one's time off; I didn't see much of the local life but I much preferred the look of the place to that of Lanark. Edinburgh really is a good-looking town as towns go. (Well, "toon" then, Ethel). The Selection Centre was on the outskirts, just below an enormous lump of stone - survival of glacial times, and akin to the one upon which Edinburgh Castle is built - which goes under the name of

Arthur's Seat. I was always intending to climb the thing - after all, it wasn't as if it was actually a mountain - but somehow I never did get around to it.

Among the tests and things, I found myself once more as a matter of routine face to face with a trick cyclist. This one was both younger and more confidence-inspiring than the one at Catterick, and I think he was genuinely pleased to be confronted with somebody whose only desire was to get back to what he had been doing previous to all this messing-about rather than the usual worn-out-fusilier type who only wanted to get out of it all. Anyway, he said he'd put in a recommendation for my return to the Signals. ~~Some months later~~ I contrived to see both the trick cyclists' reports on me. I really wish I'd been able to take copies - they made fabulous reading. The Catterick one said some really juicy things that I don't think have any particular basis in fact - though I've pondered the matter at length and often. The Edinburgh one came as close as professional ethics would allow him to declaring the report by the first one a load of balderdash. However, between them, certain clear recommendations remained. As these were later ignored, I have reason to believe that somehow I managed to get beyond the baleful influence of the things.

When my number had come up at the end of the Lanark course they'd been short of signals operators, so a lot of us had gone into the Royal Corps of Signals for training as same. Now, some six months later, it seemed it was Clerk Time - so as many of us as possible were now drafted to Aldershot for training as clerks under the auspices of the Royal Army Service Corps, to which we would be transferred. And that was that. Thus was my apparent vocation for life first chosen for me. I was sorry at the time that I wouldn't be in a position to keep up my morse - and I still am. The draft travelled south during the inter-regnal week between christmas and new year. Christmas in Scotland of course is traditionally a religious occasion only, but Christmas in the army is equally traditionally a Very Special Occasion so I was compensated in some degree for missing a chance at a genuine Scots New Year. And I started the year 1944 as (degradation of degradations) a private in the R.A.S.C.

The R.A.S.C. is a corps for which I never felt the slightest esprit, although I was to wear its cap-badge for the rest of my military career. I know the real historical situation is more complicated than that, but it always gives me the impression of being a sort of omnibus-corps to which all the odds and ends were assigned after the real specialists had been allocated to regiments and corps of their own. Its biggest job is probably transport - all road transport units in the army, plus some waterborne ones, belong to the R.A.S.C., and it also supplies drivers to some of the more specialised arms (medical for instance) that don't carry their own. The supply of food, fuel and stationery (including printing) comes under the R.A.S.C., but not the supply of clothing, equipment or ammunition which has a corps of its own (the Royal Army Ordnance Corps). Nowadays I understand it also incorporates the Army Fire Service, which in those days was a branch of the Pioneer Corps. But where I came into it was that the R.A.S.C. had the job of supplying clerks, general duty, to headquarters and similar units. And at Aldershot I found myself undergoing yet another six-week course, this time to become a clerk, general duty.

Buller Barracks, where the R.A.S.C. training battalion was located, was understood to be condemned and only retained in use because of wartime conditions. By the usual trick of having double-deck bunks all the accomodation was doubled-up on, and the hundred men per floor had the use between them of one w.c. and one urinal stall. One thing about it though - after the mud of the Edinburgh

Nissen-encampment the fact that one could walk from building to building on concrete or otherwise paved path all the way and keep one's boots clean was for a start well-nigh unbelievable. For training, squads and classrooms were paired off, one classroom of each pair being equipped with typewriters. Antique upright Olivers like the one under my sink over there as a matter of fact. Thus, half the time we spent learning to type, and the other half learning the theory of military organisation. Things like the setup throughout the headquarter chain, the names of all the various regiments and corps with their authorised abbreviations, the arrangement of units into brigades, divisions etc, and official formulas used in writing letters. My opposite number in the other squad was an intellectual type - after the war I met his name in connection with some little literary review or something - a damn sight more intellectual than I'll ever be, anyway, but we were enough in tune to leave little semi-esoteric-type notes in the typewriter for each other. I remember on one occasion he made some mention of Herbert Read. The name was familiar, but then - as now, come to that - I had not the vaguest idea of what he was supposed to have done. So my next note was in the form of a clerihow:

Herbert Read

May be very good indeed.

I'd love to concur, but

You see, I never read Herbert.

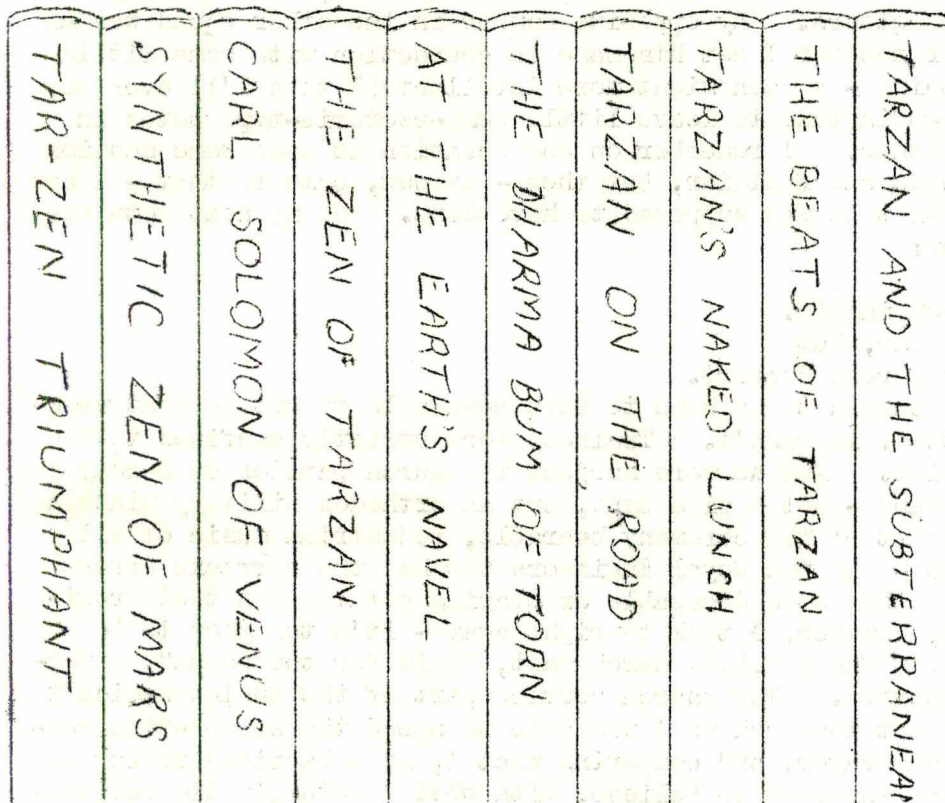
Although I was near enough to my home to have been able to get home at weekends if it had been allowed, it wasn't. Trainees were strictly confined to the Aldershot Military District. And we were subject to church parades on Sunday and things, too. We had a band - not a pipe band, but an orthodox military wind band - which made the parade part of the ceremony bearable, pedestrian music of all varieties appealing to me - and the Royal Engineers who had the barracks across the road had another band that seemed capable of playing nothing but their regimental march past, which, however, I took to right away - it's too good to be confined to one regiment. The R.A.S.C. march past, "Wait for the Wagon", however, can also be very effective. The church service part of the business didn't appeal to me at all - except inasmuch as I was able to spend the sermon-time reading-up the Book of Common Prayer, and comparing what I, as a baptised member of the Church of England, was supposed to believe, with what I actually did believe. The comparison, though I don't think it had any direct effect on my religious life as such, was certainly an eye-opener. And due to one thing and another, I think I'm right in saying that the Aldershot Garrison Church was the last church I ever set foot in.

At the end of the scheduled six weeks I was mustered as Clerk, General Duty, C3, which meant another small rise - the assistant owl mustering carried only D3 - and moved over to HQ & Holding Company to await posting to a unit. It was now that the final and crowning indignity befell me - I was made a batman. Although this meant still more money, out of the officers' pockets rather than the army's, I was not in the least bit keen on the business. There were three of us, the other two being a mate of mine also named Archibald - with a three-syllable surname to match, too - and one of the permanent staff, and we were supposed to manage a group of five junior officers between us. However, after three days of it my posting came through, and I was able to leave without having drawn any of the dubious bonus. I was bound, together with some nine others, for the G.H.Q. 2nd Echelon, 21st Army Group, situated at that time in central London.

And as the winter gave place to spring 1944, to the G.H.Q. 2nd Echelon I duly went.

(THIS HAS GOT a trifle out of hand. That, then, was PART TWO PART ONE. In the next issue I sincerely hope I'll be able to get the other side of my army life. TO BE CONTINUED)

QUADRUPLE TOIL AND TROUBLE



Fab-
ulous
Fred

THE ABOVE NOT-CARTOON is dedicated to serious constructive beat types who have apparently never heard of Edgar Rice.

Fabulous
Fred, of
course, is
dedicated
to hardly
anything.

TALKING OF NOT-CARTOONS, have a not-poem:

The way was long, the wind was cold,
The old grey mare had recently foaled.
She didn't have a very big litter,
Because the weather was so bitter.

LOT'S WIFE LOOKED BACK, AND BECAME A PILLAR OF THE CHURCH

Before things get entirely incoherent (take that worried grin off your face) I'll just round this page off and see what I can do about this quarter's LAIR. Until a fortnight ago there was no new stuff on hand, but I picked up sundry items in London the Saturday before christmas. However, there'll be a bit more room to deal with some of the backlog than usual. So swivel your eyes in a north-easterly direction and let's get on with it.

THE LAIR

(Eleventh instalment)

TALKING ABOUT THE Pelican History of England (we were if you remember), another failing of this - or any history of England come to that - is that it is strictly a history of England, and the Celtic fringe is dealt with only when it directly impinges on the English mainstream. What I mean is that a comprehensive history of the entire British Archipelago would have been more to the point.

ANDERSON, OLIVER

Ripe for the Plucking
Random at Random

"Ripe for the Plucking" is a very feeble attempt, one is tempted to doubt that it was written by the same hand as the others under this byline. I've only kept it because I have vague completist-type thoughts. The "Random" one is far more to the point. The beginning involves a bit of inspired lunacy equal to Michael Innes at his utmost - only Michael Innes wouldn't have written it quite this way! There are plenty more good hearty chuckles scattered around in it, too. By the way, I notice that "Ripe" was only published in 1961. Hope it hasn't worn him out prematurely or anything.

TAYLOR, G. RATTRAY

Sex in History

Most of you seem to have read this already. All I can say, therefore, is (a) more people ought to, and (b) I'm by no means enamoured of the annoying habit of quoting extracts from foreign works without translating, particularly when the foreign work was written in ancient Greek, and is quoted neat.

Right, now for the backlog:

ATKINSON, WILLIAM C.

A History of Spain and Portugal

Interesting, if you get curious about historic Spain and/or Portugal at any time.

GOAD, HAROLD

Language in History

This ought to be beside "Sex in History" I suppose actually. Self-explanatory I think though.

POLO, MARCO

The Travels (Penguin Classics version)

This too I found interesting enough to keep. Dead funny in parts, too. Intentionally, apparently.

PARRINDER, GEOFFREY

Witchcraft

GARDNER, GERALD B.

Witchcraft Today

These two can be treated best together. Parrinder is a missionary, and his thesis is that there's been more smoke than fire on this subject throughout history. He does his best to refute the theory that witchcraft, or any part thereof, is a true survival of an ancient pre-Christian cult. And anything that tries to look like witchcraft he's against on principle of course, anyway. Gardner, on the other hand, supports the ancient-cult-survival story, and claims inside knowledge of the current witch-cult scene. I find on the whole - though he does say silly-looking things here and there - that his version of things is far more plausible than Parrinder's. In particular, whereas Parrinder has apparently never heard of Gardner (and possibly vice versa), much of what Gardner casually mentions makes utter nonsense of Par-

rinder's elaborate refutations of other authorities. Certainly, whether Gardner's facts are substantially accurate or not, they read as if they ought to be. That is, that it would be a Good Thing if they were.

PEARL, CYRIL

The Girl with the Swansdown Seat

This book sets out to prove, by quoting chapter and verse upon chapter and verse, that the Victorian Age's reputation for strict morality was on the whole undeserved. (It can be taken as a sort of set-period study in connection with "Sex in History" mentioned overleaf). By the end, it has metamorphosised itself into a powerful plea for greater tolerance of other people's pleasures. Not that it'll do much good, as the sort of people who ought to read it wouldn't anyway. Pity.

FORESTER, C.S.

The Naval War of 1812

A detailed history of what it says. Too detailed at times to follow easily as a whole - Forester finds it fascinating to follow individual ships and small flotillas here and there and doesn't (to my mind) succeed in relating all the various facets of the war to each other sufficiently. Another peeve of mine is the grudging way he treats of the British landings that culminated in the Battle of New Orleans (famed in song and story) - he claims that as a strictly naval historian he'd be justified in ignoring it altogether, and only treats it in very sketchy fashion. Damn it - it was all part of the same war, and strictly subordinate to the main naval effort at that - the book wouldn't have been complete without it, and is barely that as it is. Still and all, it held the interest.

ASBURY, HERBERT

The French Quarter

A history of the picayune side of New Orleans. The Battle of New Orleans is in here too, together with the presumably authentic Lafitte story. For one thing, there were two Lafitte brothers. The film "The Buccaneer" only concerned itself with one of them, and telescoped two separate incidents in his career that happened several years apart. It seems there actually was a Dominique You, too. Besides this, the book touches on the Mississippi riverboats, Storyville, Marie Laveau, the post-Civil War regime, Congo Square and all sorts of other aspects of the Crescent City.

ANONYMOUS

The Geography Behind History

A peculiar volume. On the front cover is embossed the number "186", on the spire "910" is similarly embossed. Inside it claims to be "Discussion Books, No. 12". No author is given, though one of the preface pages seems to be missing, perhaps that would have cleared up the mystery at least somewhat. As it is, not even the publishers are known. The book itself is of considerable interest to me though. It gives examples of various ways in which geography has affected history. (H'm - come to think of it, this ought to go next to "Sex in History" and "Language in History". Any more historical specialities anyone?)

FISHER, JAMES

Rockall

An exhaustive study of the geography, history (natural and chronological) and just about every other aspect of what I consider one of the most sense-of-wonder-filled bits of the earth's surface - the barren gull-infested rock of Rockall that sticks up some 70 feet out of the Atlantic in the middle of some well-known fishing-grounds. And one learns more about that rock than one would have imagined it had in it.