
*Arts & Letters***THE COLLECTED SHORT STORIES OF ELIZABETH BOWEN**

by Elizabeth Bowen
Knopf, 1981
782 pp. \$17.95

Since World War I, English writers have sought stylistic solutions to problems created by the great rift with pre-1914 experience—particularly the surfacing of feelings submerged in the Victorian consciousness. Preserving the reticence of the earlier age, the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973) managed to create people thoroughly modern in morals, if quite traditional in manners. Says a character in her 1930s story, "The Man of the Family": "But I honestly believe that manners (or people not having them) undermine happiness far quicker than morals." Like Jane Austen, Bowen believed that polite constraints ("life with the lid on") heightened rather than deadened feeling. Her own cultivated reticence led to precise, evocative descriptions of setting and social milieu. Perhaps ironically, some of her best stories were written in London during the unmannerly chaos of World War II: life with the lid blown off. Combining the Gothic genre with the city-under-siege theme, she created tales of horror and psychological insight. A Londoner in "Sunday Afternoon" is asked, while visiting Ireland, if the bombing is really so frightening. "Yes," he replies. "But as it does not connect with the rest of life, it is difficult, you know, to know what one feels. One's feelings seem to have no language for a thing so preposterous." But Bowen's wartime stories deny this: She found the exact words for a thing so preposterous.

**THE PAST WE SHARE:
The Near Eastern Ancestry
of Western Folk Literature**

by E. L. Ranelagh
Quartet Books, 1979
(released in the United
States, 1981)
278 pp. \$21.95

The theme of *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* is only a recent variation on one from *The Arabian Nights*. And Antar, a sixth-century Arabian poet-warrior resembles, in many striking particulars, the earlier legendary Irish hero, Cuchulainn. Such borrowings, argues Ranelagh, lecturer in English and folklore at the University of Maryland, are part of the early, extensive cross-fertiliza-

tion between Eastern and Western literature and folk traditions. Created in the ancient civilizations of India, Egypt, Greece, Persia, Sumeria, and Judea, many plots, motifs, and character types were assimilated into the rich Arabic folk tradition and then transmitted to Europe. Nor was the commerce strictly literary. The development of European knight-hood—its military style and social code—owed much to the East-West exchange. Romance, so closely bound to chivalry, filtered into southern France from Muslim Spain late in the 11th century, and passion, the engine of romance, was but “one of the refinements of living which the West was happy to adopt from the superior Arabic civilization.” Chaucer, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, and Cervantes were indebted to a number of Arabian innovations, including rhyme. The Arabs, by inventing and legitimizing tales as literature, are to be credited, Ranelagh maintains, “with having fixed the shape of ‘the fiction of the world.’”

VOLTAIRE: A Biography

by Haydn Mason
 Johns Hopkins, 1981
 194 pp. \$14.95

Like *Candide*, his most famous fictional creation, Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet, 1694–1778) was troubled by the world's bigotry, tyranny, and cruelty. To portray this witty (if often anguished) *philosophe*, British historian Mason relies more on Voltaire's voluminous correspondence than on his published works. Voltaire's early popularity at Louis XIV's court was soon diminished by his inability “to treat his enemies with reasoned scorn.” “His brilliance was well recognized,” Mason writes, “but the *Académie* looked for an assurance of respectability, any hopes of which were unremittingly destroyed by a succession of indiscretions large and small.” Moving between the elegant life in Paris and monastic solitude, Voltaire found his greatest happiness after his 1759 purchase of Ferney, an estate close to the Swiss border. He set up a stocking factory and watchworks and turned a “rude wilderness” into a thriving community. Voltaire the deist and supporter of enlightened despotism is remembered less,