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Bowen Autobiography Has Fragments of Life, Writing

... books, lengthy critical studies, these are perpetually being written about writers, novelists in particular. I, inevitably, have been the subject of a certain number of these. While appreciative of the honor done me and of the hard work involved, I have found some of them wildly off the mark. To the point of asking myself, if anybody must write a book about Elizabeth Bowen, why not Elizabeth Bowen?

Elizabeth Bowen had embarked upon her autobiography but died (in February of 1973) before the project was completed.

To her friend and literary executor, Spencer Curtis Brown, fell the task of collecting the unfinished fragments of her life.

He has assembled them with respect and a love which captures her in an honest, unblurred, unblubbery series of portraits.

"Of her early childhood in Dublin," he says, "she has written in 'Seven Winters.'" The chapters printed here tell of the influence on her girlhood of her Anglo-Irish background and of the generations who had lived for three hundred years on the same land and for two hundred years in the same house."

The Anglo-Irish, Elizabeth Bowen writes, together with what was left of the indigenous autocrats, would subsequently have been in a poor way were it not for writing. To writing, she feels, they have taken like ducks to water.

"Accommodating ourselves," she allows, "to a tamer day, we interchanged sword-play for word-play."

Repertee, with its thrusts, opened alternative possibilities of matery. Given rein, creative imagination ran to extreme situations, to confrontations.

Bravado, she says, characterizes much Irish and All Anglo-Irish writing. One's mind punches up black and white images of the defiant Sean O'Casey, the drunken Brendan Behan, the teetotalling George Bernard Shaw — (writing to the actress Ellen Terry and speculating on what kind of offspring they would produce if the child had his looks and her brains).

"It follows," Bowen concludes, "that primarily we have produced dramatists, the novel being too life-like, humdrum, to do us justice . . . Goldsmith, Sheridan, Wilde, Shaw, Beckett. Art is for us inseparable from artifice: of that, the theatre is the home."

It was her "transplanting" to England at the age of seven, she thinks, that made her a novelist.



BOOKS of the TIMES

by GEORGE VUKELICH

Pictures and Conversations

*Chapters of an Autobiography
with other collected writings*

by Elizabeth Bowen
Knopf, 196 pp., \$7.95

The "history" of Kent-England inebriated her, the eloquent landscape won her over.

"Not long after my eighth birthday," she confesses, "I entered upon a long, voluptuous phase in which I saw life as a non-stop historical novel, disguised only thinly (in my day) by modern dress . . . History, as more austere I now know it, is not romantic. But I am."

Curtis Brown has included in this collection "The Move-In" (Chapter I of the unfinished novel on which Elizabeth Bowen was working when she died), her "Nativity Play" (presented in the Protestant Cathedral in Londonderry) and her fascinating "Notes on Writing a Novel."

It's the most practical, professional writing advice since Augie Derleth or Mari Sandoz.

• The novelist's perceptions of her characters take place in **the course of the actual writing of the novel.** To an extent, the novelist is in the same position as his reader. But his perceptions should be always just in advance.

• Ruling sympathy out, a novel must contain at least one magnetic character. At least one character capable of keeping the reader up, as though he (the reader) were in the presence of someone he is in love with.

• The novelist's — any writer's — object is to whittle down his meaning to the exactest and finest possible point. What, of course, is fatal is when he does not know what he does mean: he has no point to sharpen.

It is sad that Elizabeth Bowen did not finish her last book. But it is a very real joy that Spencer Curtis Brown did.