

FICTION 1

THE HAPPY ELEPHANTS
by Peter O'Connor/Co-Op
Books £5.95 pp 205

Bernard Levin

THIS Irish novel begins so well that when, soon after page 40, it started to go wrong in my hands, disappointment was held at bay for some time in the hope that it would recover. Alas, it does not; indeed, it gets steadily worse, and long before the end I was praying for release. How can this be? Are there two hands at work, or has a sole author come off the rails a fifth of the way through? Let us see.

The *Happy Elephants* begins in the final days of peace in August 1939, when the traditional Last Train Out of Europe steams into a small town on the Czech-Austrian border. On it are a mixed lot of refugees with names like Viefiel (Howmuch), Dudelsack (Bagpipes), Vergnügen (Fun) and Perhaps. In the station they pick up Möglich (Possible) and one Strubbins, who has spent the last 30 years sitting on the bridge over the tracks with his head stuck through the rafters; later, at a border crossing, they find the Führer himself ("... a small man, Hitler, whose back and bristly neck they stood behind, looked over his shoulder angrily..."), worried that he has not paid his subscription to the James Wigg Association, whose chief European representative he is.

Still the hackles do not rise; this may be a surrealist novel, but the ingenuity is plentiful, and so are such phrases as "... each man wearing that expression of button-bursting politeness which precedes an international dispute" and "The expression of regret was quick, like a breeze on soup." And there is more than that; the free associations insistently recall the genius of Flann O'Brien (*Miles na Gopaleen*), and the attitudes to, and of, authority resemble those of "The Good Soldier Schweik." Mr O'Connor seems to be an original, a real find, and his book promises to be an airy but mordant satire.

The promise is broken. Even before, there are some odd clues, though what they are clues to it is difficult to see. "The train rumbled in a tunnel and held there" is not English, and strongly suggests a translation, as does "We haven't to do that," meaning "we mustn't." Still, we have not lost yet; when the refugees reach England there is a description of proud man dressed in a little brief authority that goes sharply home:

... the Immigration Department seemed to wake up, to proliferate. Crates and chairs began to branch away from the customs section; blackboards channelled the non-British into those corridors instead. Suddenly Immigration became the department. Clerks and office boys tried hats for size, glared and cursed, admitted the vinegary tolerance of their new capacity.

There is also the same rich and observant imagination that we started with:

A party of hens came into the clearing at a rumba. A pheasant put its head up from the peas, like a policeman, and down again.

And there is a parody of official gibberish that suggests O'Brien very strongly indeed, without giving off a feeling that Mr O'Connor is deliberately imitating the master:

Incidents of this sort in this type of wartime situation may seem

unprecedented now, but HMS Govt learn what we can from them to prevent their becoming rife, of which there is every chance if this is anything to go by. We should remember that we are in a state of war in which nations face the unprecedented as a matter of course. This is no exception and we must act accordingly, without leaping into the darkness of contemporary affairs willy-nilly, whatever outside impressions would dictate, without looking beyond or letting our vision fall short of the evidence as we see it, and we are. *Invisibilia non Decipiunt* may well be the case...

But from then on the book degenerates into such terrible Irish whimsy (and there is nothing more terrible than terrible Irish whimsy) that the theory of dual authorship becomes almost irresistible. Strubbins fetches up on an island in the Thames, with a family called Wynne. There is a tiresome clergyman called Tizer, and a faintly sinister spiritualist, Mr Malcolm; also a girl, called Rhona, and a dog called The Borough Surveyor. Strubbins's father, it has transpired, was a collector of elaborate stoves; uncountable numbers of interminable pages are devoted to the rediscovery and assembly of his collection. There are subplots by the wagonload, none of them either making sense or giving off sparks of humour or inventiveness, indeed none predominating long enough to arouse any real interest. The James Wigg Association, which promised so well, becomes little more than tedious padding; more, the whole of the second half of the book suggests strongly that desperation has set in and that the author's desire to have done with it is as strong as the reader's.

Even the surrealism itself deteriorates; a succession of random and unconnected episodes is not the same as the ordered disorder of a truly liberated imagination, and the incomprehensibility of the ending has no excitement, promise or threat to redeem it. And even the striking phrases dry up.

I think the truth is probably less mysterious than it at first seems. Mr O'Connor had a good idea and assembled an engaging cast to express it; the title of his book refers to a "Picture Post" photo-cartoon by John Heartfield, in which Hitler and Chamberlain became elephants ("The elephants are happy because they have got peace, but for how long have the elephants got peace?"), and the didactic purpose of the book was thus established early. But then the author's invention faltered, he dragged in a fresh set of characters who obscured his purpose, and eventually he lost interest in his aim. If so, he can hardly expect the reader to do otherwise.

KNUT HAMSUN

spells gloom. like a row of de blocked fjord. fact a Norwegian scarcely be des or scintillating themes are peccavian: peasants their lot, as th drunken brawl gull float over th it has also to that Hamsun is o writers of this nearest English e I suspect, Thoma

Wayfarers, first 1927 and now reif translation, is a st tion; set at the century, it records of the small fishin of northern Norwa dependent they ar and the toys of civilisation, the mo and corrupt they b one wants to America, because there are said to heavy in the pocke farers" themsel young fishermen w become rootless wandering disgrun Norway like pickp desert. August is and warm-hearted, thief and a cow! Edevart remains inn the world until it q him down — a he worn around the ne cheap jewellery in often trade. But, in of Hamsun's charact farers, lost in a de they hardly underst were human beings, on, carrying on as cin permitted, and they they died."

But despite Hamsence upon the corrupt of civilisation, he is by a pastoral or roman Peasant life, in "Way composed of pettiness callousness; his chara mixture of hard-nose tiveness and piety, superstition, trying ha their neighbours, alw

SHORT REPORT

Children of Hachiman
Guest (Bodley Head £5.9

Hachiman is the Japanese war, and his sons, the were an ambitious samur bent on revenge against family. There is a list main characters at the fr the book, a map, and a of historical explanation. we learn that these twelf century people have bec glamorous and legendary Japanese song and story. sure if Mrs Guest's plan i take them down a peg or, but she is good at it. H characters, when not beh one another, are relent ordinary; they haunt low without conviction and hav for local colour ("... try ti pine seeds and preserved cumquats. Quite delicious There is a very bloody end **The Long Hot Summer** by Rosemary Friedman (Hutchinson £5.95 pp 288). A life of traditional Home Counties desperation is brot to a head for Lorna, by dr a friend's suicide and a encounter with Armand, of her daughter. She joi