

of everything save each other, deliver the most ravishing and haunting love duet in all opera. As Peter Hayworth wrote in *The Observer* back in 1962 'when the curtain comes down, virtue remains triumphantly unrewarded'. The challenge of 'Poppea' lies in the suggestion, intolerable on the whole to the Protestant ethic, that the world may be well lost for love as a sexual passion even if, or especially when, adulterous. The power of Monteverdi's music is such and so glowing in its sensuality, that while we listen there can be no shadow of a doubt.

# LITERARY

## Winners and Losers

Nigel Hollis

So, contrary to no-one's expectations, when publishing's end of year prize-giving came around on 25 November, V. S. Naipaul was found to be top of the fiction class and headmaster Mr Booker gave a nice £5,000 cheque as the prize—tax free. Apart from anything else this means that there are very few significant prizes that V. S. Naipaul has not now won and it would be tempting to guess that he has earned more money in tax-free prizes than he has in royalties from his 14 or so books, but it is probably not true. Although the award received wider publicity than usual, and was for the first time given to an established author, it is scarcely a decision that is likely to set the world alight or hugely improve the sales performance of *A Free State*. Perhaps the most promising sign of the possibility of increasing general interest in this prize is at least the smell of scandal seeping out from the locked doors of the judging committee—why was the announcement postponed and is this connected with the vociferous complaint of some publishers that *In A Free State* is not, in fact, a novel at all but a series of short stories? A major row would at least give the impression that people cared a great deal about the prize—something which Booker McConnell deserve in return for their investment.

Does Naipaul's mopping up of so many prizes mean, in effect, that he is the best novelist around? It is a question to which normally highly-opinionated journalists and reviewers have not addressed themselves, nor

will I, no less opinionated, attempt to do so, but I would just say this, with no disrespect intended to Mr. Naipaul. Some writers go even so far as to stipulate in their contracts that they shall not be entered into prizes—think how humiliating for it to be discovered that Graham Greene had had a novel entered but it had not won, etc., and in this case, the entries were largely restricted to books published during a certain time of year. Clearly Mr Naipaul is best at winning prizes even if not necessarily writing novels.

As Mr Naipaul looks back on 1971 with some satisfaction, the organizers of the June Book Bang, despite all contrary evidence, appear to be able to do so. For the contortions engineered by Messrs Wilson and Callaghan at the time of devaluation to make the public believe that devaluation was the release and happiness that had so long been sought was similar to that of Mr Goff, the Bang's director, in telling guarantors that all their money had been lost in one of the most triumphant PR operations ever mounted in any industry. Mr Goff will go to his grave with the phrase 'a tremendous spin-off of publicity' chiselled on his headstone. Publicity for what, though? Effective for the Book Bang itself, yes, but for books? I doubt whether any publishers will be announcing bigger or better results and increased sales next April as a result of it or the prospect of another.

Talking of financial results, the Frankfurt Book Fair was a quiet affair, partly perhaps because of a very frank article in the Times

Business Section by Andrew Lumsden who had dug around sufficiently in the British publishing scene to prick many success bubbles by exposing the true financial position, profit and return-on-capital-wise. Few firms would give much confidence to a potential investor (few have to) but then perhaps it is just as culpable of a publisher to make too much money as too little—he should be financing new authors/projects, paying authors more, etc.

Crowell-Collier-Macmillan who got involved in Cassells late in 1970, must have thought that they had walked into a nightmare in 1971 with at least three considerable libel cases coming their way, involving Nicholas Monsarrat, Lord Francis-Williams and worst, David Irving and the PQ17 incident, during whose court-case the firm were described in most disparaging terms. Never mind, they published my most enjoyed book of the year—*Annapurna South Face* by Chris Bonington—think, all the way up that mountain, all that excitement without leaving my armchair. It was a pretty successful book too.

Pretty successful also, Mr. Alistair MacLean with *Bear Island*. 'Of course' you may say. Yes, of course, but he does have to overcome the problem of either no Press at all or, at best, a grudging snidey sneer from our literary advisers; and anyway, how did he get to be so popular? I hate to suggest the answer, but could it be that he tells a darn good story, fast and well? In addition he had his books made into big, fast-moving films from which the public remembered his name. Same goes for Leslie Thomas and his *Virgin Soldiers*. He has one advantage over MacLean this year, however. Perhaps he got shorter and snidier reviews but he prickled Auberon Waugh sufficiently to provoke a page-full of vitriol in *The Spectator*. Now, a page of Auberon Waugh in full cry (as he often is) makes for me, the most readable thing in British journalism. Over 1971 his reviews have consistently been the most (only?) readable features of the literary