

NOVELS OF THE WEEK

Fathers and Sons

By ROY FOSTER

EDWARD, EDWARD. By Lolah Burford. Cassells. £2.75.

POST OFFICE. By **Charles Bukowski.** London Magazine Editions. £2.50.

A JAVELIN FOR JONAH. By Gladys Mitchell. Michael Joseph. £2.20.

LAST YEAR Lolah Burford wrote quite a pleasant quasi-supernatural novel about 13th-century history transposed into 19th-century England; it was called "The Vision of Stephen" and was a good, unpretentious novel as far as that sort of thing goes. By that sort of thing I mean the ambitious historical novel; and to this Mrs. Burford has turned once more and produced a tremendously overblown epic called "Edward, Edward", to considerable transatlantic acclaim. It is 20 times too long, a hundred times too over-written and immeasurably over-sensational; and I expect it will sell in undeserved hundreds of thousands.

Nonetheless, it deserves some passing attention—if only because of the paucity of any new novels at all this season, let alone worthwhile ones. The action takes place in early 19th-century England; the cast involves the gloomily depraved aristocracy; and the primary issues are, strange as it may seem, incest and sodomy. At a first encounter, the combination of Mrs. Burford's mim-mouthed prose and the splutteringly enthusiastic dust-jacket reviews may lead you to think that the book has something to do with Methodist puritanism and gothic-revival romanticism; but this is, so far as I could follow, a complete blind. Within the first chapters the story is told which is repeated, with slight variations, throughout the book's whole turgid length: the wicked Earl of Tyne, torn between good and evil, marries on her deathbed a lady whom he has debauched and undertakes to bring up their illegitimate son; and before we know where we are the boy and his father are having it away in every picturesque part of what Mrs. Burford supposes to have been 19th-century Europe.

And this is, basically, all Mrs. Burford has to tell us: thus the story remains as inconclusive and unlikely as its central issue. Granted, some effort is made to have young Edward involved with a wandering preacher, extremist Oxford politics, and a Shelley-inspired contemporary; and a scrappy picture of London society at the time is produced, with history-textbook catechisms of names, dates and events rattled off as a respite between the steamier passages. What the author is out to do, after all, is not to provide a picture of late Georgian England—but to write a "great" novel of obsessive passion. It is as if she had read "Wuthering Heights" and David Storey's "Radcliffe" and then sat down, with an entirely admirable American determination, to out-do them both.

But this is not, unfortunately, the wellspring of inspiration whence comes a novel of obsessive passion. Mrs. Burford plugs on manfully through 600 pages of 15-line sentences, dutiful historical apostrophes, and tangles of dependent clauses (I quote at random: "It had been a marriage that had met with approval neither of her over-large family, of finer blood but present impoverishment, that had at least enjoyed her services, if no settlement, nor his, that had expected him to marry into some competence, if not of fortune, at least of advancement.") Throughout, all Mrs. Burford really cares about is sundering

her protagonists in tears and re-uniting them in bed; of such, she implies, are true love-hate matches made. Historical perspective receiving short shrift early on, she may intend—though I hardly believe it—simply to titillate or shock; if so, she fails here too. "Edward, Edward" may be an unpleasant book, but it is primarily so because of turgid style and a prating one, if it is generally accepted as an "extraordinary gothic romance" and "one of the best novels of the year" (quotations from American reviews, not Messrs. Cassells' blurb), I shall fulfil a projected vow never again to read a historical novel — possibly, indeed, a novel of any kind.

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I TURNED WITH relief to "Post Office," a low-keyed piece of anti-heroics by **Charles Bukowski.** Mr. Bukowski describes the machinations of a post-office official enmeshed in bureaucracy; it is a tribute to his forceful and economic writing that Henry, the shambling, unstable, generally half-drunk protagonist, remains interesting throughout and that the U.S. post office system achieves epic proportions as an all-devouring monster.

Henry likes to drink whiskey and take days off to go to the races and try out his charm on a variety of women; but he has to work for a living. The same tastes and structures apply to the majority, at least in Mr. Bukowski's and Henry's world, and he writes of the middle-aged drop-out culture in America with a wry lyricism. Henry — and, perhaps, **Charles Bukowski** — would have been happier with Henry Miller's coterie 40 years ago, spending quiet days at Clichy and rowdy nights in the Place Pigalle; the pathos of "Post Office" is that bohemianism has passed by kind-hearted, ageing, boozy, whoring Henry and his kind. It seems symbolic that he ends up uneasily on the fringe of a group of self-confident hippies, for whom his company will last as long as his money does. I liked a lot about "Post Office," not least its economy: it is one-eighth as long as "Edward, Edward" and published by a small and, to me, unknown company; it probably won't attract a fraction of the attention awarded Mrs. Burford's excesses. But for all its slightness, "Post Office" is a strong and likeable first novel.

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FINALLY, WITH some relief, a piece of pure froth by Gladys Mitchell, who — I noted with awe — has already written forty-one detective novels. Judging by "A Javelin for Jonah," she's still going strong. An unpopular master in a school for rich delinquents, which concentrates entirely on athletics, is done in with a javelin; lots of suspects, a few red herrings, a clean-cut hero, an aged Dame as sleuth; it's all as predictable as possible, totally escapist, light-years from father-son incest or middle-aged drop-outs; and I didn't mind a bit.

"The Fearful Vold." By Geoffrey Moorhouse (Hodder and Stoughton, £3.50) published this week, was reviewed on March 16th, by Peter Somerville-Large.