
NONFICTION IN BRIEF

By Richard J. Margolis

THE LAST ENEMY

By Richard Hillary.

184 pp. New York:

St. Martin's Press. \$10.95.

In the summer of 1940 Richard Hillary, a young Royal Air Force pilot fresh out of Oxford, was shot down in his Spitfire over the English Channel. His hands and face were horribly burned, but he lived to write the tale, an understated story of heroism coupled with a moving account of how he reluctantly developed an affection for suffering humanity. The work came out in 1942 under the title "Falling Through Space," after which Hillary went back to war. He was killed in combat on Jan. 7, 1943.

Later that year his book was born again, this time as "The Last Enemy." Then, as Ernest K. Gann, the novelist, notes in an introduction to this latest edition, it "was buried beneath the literary rubble" of war and all but forgotten. Now a new generation has the chance to read this small masterpiece.

It is a tale of gains and losses, a loss of innocence to the war and a hard-won gain of sympathy for friends and countrymen. Hillary describes his companions and time at Oxford as pleasant but feckless: "We were held together by a common taste in friends, sport, literature, and idle amusement, by a deep-rooted distrust of all organized emotion and standardized patriotism, and by a somewhat self-conscious satisfaction in our ability to succeed without apparent effort." When they finished their studies, most of Hillary's elite cohort joined the R. A. F. He explains his own motives, characteristically, in terms of self-gratification: "As a fighter pilot I hoped for a concentration of amusement, fear and exaltation which it would be impossible to experience in any other form of existence."

He got all that and more, much of it in London hospitals. A half-dozen skin grafts and a long, painful convalescence sapped his roguish confidence, and the deaths of his closest friends in the R. A. F., reported to him one by one as he lay bandaged in bed, inspired in him an unaccustomed humility.

It was a state of mind that his mother took care to encourage. "You should be glad this has to happen to you," she said to him one day. "Too many people told you how attractive you were and you believed them. You were well on the way to becoming something of a cad. Now you'll find out who your real friends are."

His conversion came soon enough, during a London bombing that caught him on furlough from the hospital. A young woman, dying amid the rubble of what minutes before had been her home, looked into Hillary's scarred face and said compassionately, "I see they got you too." In the end, the young man absorbed the message: "All humanity had been in those few words." That was Hillary's final benediction.
