

BOOK REVIEW / Last of the Edwardians brings his saga to a close (318)

By GEORGE BARBER

SIMON RAVEN is master of the 'It's a shame we still can't have servants' school of English writing. His Alms For Oblivion sequence ran to 10 volumes. Its successor, the First Born of Egypt series, runs to seven. This total exceeds Antony Powell's A Dance To The Music Of Time (12) and C P Snow's Strangers and Brothers (11), making it the longest contemporary sequential novel. But you could also say it's the same book 17 times over. In the finale, The Troubadour (Hutchinson pounds 13.99), it's business as usual - same principal characters, same nastiness - within a fairly silly saga about how a wayward Edwardian might view today. Under the canopy of an enviable classical knowledge Raven presides, moving the pieces, scoffing, vilifying. Occasionally he's right (on modern exam philosophy: 'The idea is that nobody should be allowed to fail and nobody to excel') and often he's very funny: he has a ghost give public-ferry details, a man with a prostate problem urinate on a coffin at a funeral. However, predictable targets - mass tourism, cars, the lower orders, bad grammar, education - often come in for predictable treatment. 'But, of course, Ivan thought, girls do not do anything as decorative and subservient as curtsying these days.'

In the end, it is the demise of elitist values, rigid etiquette and the old order that cut the ground away from Raven. Where's the fun in being bisexual if no one is going to be shocked any more? He is one of the last of the generation who were schooled in the 'Greek way' - boxing naked, snogging in the dorms, being interfered with by masters. His writing is as fine a testament as you could get to the advantages of that education.

The Sunday Review Page 028

The Independent on Sunday

COPYRIGHT (C) NEWSPAPER PUBLISHING PLC 1988 - 1994

>