

New light on Chekhov

by Emanuel Litvinoff

CHEKHOV, by Ernest J. Simmons
(Jonathan Cape, 45s).

BIographies of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, and critical appreciations of his prolific writings, have always had a certain incompleteness, with the result that Chekhov has appeared as an enigmatic giant, a mountain half obscured by mist. Yet few writers were more intensively discussed by their contemporaries, produced so vast a body of work or so decisively stamped their signature on the literature of their country. Chekhov wrote so much, and was so much written about, that more than a hundred years after his death there is still no single definitive bibliography of his writings, and scholars are still disciplining the quantities of new material that have appeared in the Soviet Union, partly in connection with the centenary of Chekhov's birth in 1960, partly as the result of the greater freedom allowed in recent years to the publication of ideologically suspect material.

Mr Simmons has made excellent use of these fresh sources to give a detailed account of Chekhov's intellectual and literary development, his influence on other writers, his circumspect relations with women, and his attitude to the repression, squalor, social inequality and vulgarity of Russian society. Chekhov was a social reformer who mistrusted didacticism. In his early beginnings when he wrote principally to support his impoverished family and to finance his medical studies, he rarely showed signs of being more than a talented entertainer, tailoring his sketches to the harmless formulae required by magazines that traded in the kind of fun that would not upset the censors. But the pressure of his own immensely compassionate nature, his searing experiences as a young physician confronted by poverty and disease, first sharpened the satirical edge of his humour then deepened its tragic undertones until, by the time he was 28, the editor of one leading Russian journal described him as "the greatest artistic force in Russian literature."

But the meteoric ascent to eminence of this grandson of a serf was accomplished with extraordinary spiritual conflict and humility. On the eve of his remarkable trans-Siberian journey to the penal island of Sakhalin to study the lives of its convict population, he wrote to a friend: "I must teach myself, learn everything from the beginning, because as a writer I am a complete ignoramus." Success punished him; he was tormented by his failure to reconcile his artistic principles with the need to directly criticise the evils of Russian society; he was equally depressed by the moral platitudes of "the wood lice and molluscs

we call the intelligentsia. The drowsy apathetic, lazy, philosophising, cold intelligentsia . . ." These conflicts were never entirely resolved in Chekhov's short life and were complicated by the inroads upon his vitality caused by his tuberculosis. He assuaged his conscience by medical work among peasants and by energetically organising programmes of social medicine. At the same time, he perfected his artistic method to the point that it made its observations on society obliquely but with tremendous effect and without overt political or moral preachment. A passionate Dreyfusard, he yet specified the character of his involvement by saying that "great writers and artists should engage in politics only to the extent necessary to defend themselves against politics."

Maxim Gorki summarised Chekhov as "a man who has an enormous and original talent, the kind of writer out of whom epochs in the history of literature and in social thought are made. . . ." It is the great merit of Mr Simmons's book that it brings vividly to life those qualities in Chekhov which make that statement both true and comprehensible. It will also drive the reader to hunt out all he can of Chekhov's work, his vast correspondence, and the diaries and memoirs in which close friends have written about him, much of which is still unavailable in English translation.