

A SERIES THAT MAKES THE RERUN WORTHWHILE

By John J. O'Connor June 15, 1984

RERUNS can be useful. Sunday at 9 P.M., public television's "Masterpiece Theater" is bringing back the 13-episode BBC-Australian Broadcasting production of "To Serve Them All My Days" on Channel 13. It's a delightful summer treat, both for those who missed the series the first time and for those who want to see it again.

The Andrew Davies script is based on a novel that its author, R. F. Delderfield, described as "shamelessly autobiographical." Delderfield, who died about 10 years ago, was a popular British author, whose fine eye for social detail and good ear for gradations of accent were in the tradition of Trollope and Galsworthy.

The story's hero is portrayed to perfection by John Duttine. He plays David Powlett-Jones, a native of Wales who, because of shell shock, is retired from the British Army before World War I ends. He accepts a post at a boys' school in Devon. While the school is called Banfylde, Delderfield's source of inspiration was West Buckland School, and this television portrait was filmed at Milton Abbey School in Dorset.

Davy arrives as a solemn and shaken young man, embittered by the cruelty and waste of war. He is not prepared, however, for the determined optimism of the school's delightfully eccentric headmaster, Algernon Herries, played with disarming charm and shrewdness by Frank Middlemass. Davy gradually develops a close and warm relationship with Herries, who is eager to keep this "so splendidly touchy" Welshman in "our little world seething with arrogant and thoughtless privilege."

Then there is the rest of the faculty, a singularly crotchety lot, many of whom have been summoned from retirement to fill in for younger teachers gone off to war. The gregarious Carter (Neil Stacey), excused from the military because of a bad knee, is obnoxiously jingoistic in diatribes against the Hun, prompting Davy to tell him that he doesn't know what he's talking about. That's enough to make Howarth (Alan MacNaughton), the resident cynic, take tentative notice of the new young man. But old Cordwainer (John Welsh), the chronic complainer, is still unimpressed as he sets about convincing his students that they are little more than fools, dolts and nincompoops.

At the quiet center of all this is Davy, slowly realizing that he has an exceptional talent for teaching history and that the rest of his life will be bound to this small out-of-the-way school. He begins recovering from his mental and physical war wounds, setting the stage for the rest of the story, which will cover 18 years, taking him to about age 40. There is a steady flow of insightful and touching moments. This is no hermetically sealed "Goodbye, Mr. Chips." Davy's world reflects the events of his times. Once again, the British performances are incredibly good, and Mr. Duttine is, even in this talented company, exceptional.