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BOOKS

Another New Zealand Novel

MOONSHINE. By Helen Wilson. Raupo
books: A. H. and A. W. Reed, Wellington.

(Reviewed by F. L. Combs).

THE writing of a New Zealand novel is a thankless task, for if it proves its worth its sale will be perhaps a thousand. (This is the equivalent of 140,000 in U.S.A.) Besides being a thankless task it is a difficult one, for the writer has, off his or her own bat, to fuse characters and background and to vivify them with complete understanding. It is a sort of Robinson Crusoe job, and reminds one of Crusoe working up unaided his unsatisfactory raw materials and then firing his own pottery. Elsewhere fiction writers are the inheritors of a tradition which signposts and lights the way for them. The language of the heart that New Zealand will one day speak has yet to be discovered, and in their quest of it the painter artists are perhaps ahead of the artists in fiction.

Outlaw's Progress was for this reason a notable book and so is Moonshine, by Helen Wilson. In both cases the writers have stood up to their jobs. They write with intimate knowledge of the setting they give their story. And they do not shirk their difficulties. It would be so easy to vamp something in the Maugham or the Chekhov or the Hemingway or the Priestley manner. Neither of these two writers does this. Cost what it may, they will make no truce with bunk. Helen Wilson, as a result, makes a contribution to our local fiction which will command the respectful attention of everyone who regards novel writing as the supreme art and the one most essential to national self-understanding.

The background of Moonshine is colonial Irish of the 1880's. Its writer knows these people, their courage, often reckless, their liveliness of mind, their generosity, their proneness to fantasy, their undependable changes of feeling. She is also intimately acquainted with the details, harrowing and frequently sordid, of their struggles for a crust in a new land. Using a young teacher (male) as the focus of the interest, she unfolds a sensational plot—which, as it remains in discerning touch with the facts of her people's psychology and environment, becomes engrossing. One thinks at times of the Hon. Emily Lawless' *Hurricane*, but the latter's Connaught had been worked up into literary material for at least two centuries, whereas Helen Wilson's South Canterbury is, as far as literature goes, virgin soil.

Although the hero, as he tells the story in the first person, is never absent from it, he is not the centre of interest. He has manhood enough and is not doted upon by his creator, but it is his relations with the colonial Irish and the manner in which he is entangled in their doings that hold the reader's attention. A love story, somewhat sketchily touched on but told with restraint and true feeling, ends in tragedy. The lawless and ruthless black sheep who is the cause of all the misfortune, with his daring, his genial plausibility, and his cold lack of scruple, is the character of greatest interest.

In what respect does this veracious and able piece of writing reveal the

difficulties it has not completely mastered? It seems to me that Miss Wilson has not altogether succeeded in translating shrewdly observed and sensitively retained reminiscence into a work of unfettered imagination. All the same, hers is no mean achievement and I await with keen interest her next effort.

JOURNAL FOR GEOGRAPHERS

THE NEW ZEALAND GEOGRAPHER:
Vol. 1, No. 1 (Printed by Whitcombe &
Toms for the New Zealand Geographical
Society)

THE New Zealand Geographical Society may be unduly optimistic in supposing that "the moment could be hardly more opportune" for launching its own journal, but moments are seldom opportune to those who dwell on difficulties. The Society has decided to forget difficulties and plunge ahead, and its first plunge arrests attention. Pride of place—prominence might be a better word—goes to a magnificently-illustrated if strangely-written article by John Pascoe on the high country of Canterbury. If the purpose of the Society is "to promote and stimulate the study of geography," this is the kind of stimulus to give the general public—illustrations that are not merely good but superb, and comments that you can laugh at but can't ignore or forget. It is doubtful if there were ever such romantic figures in the Canterbury foothills as the author has found there, and certain that most musters are not "little men, almost weedy"; but the real test is whether John Pascoe's "cobbers" and "jokers" will "go crook" when they meet themselves in his paragraphs. If they do they are dirty dogs, since his affection for them throbs in every sentence. Anyhow, those who question the place of flesh-and-blood stuff in a geographical journal are offered a wide choice in the things that such publications usually provide: a long "regional" study in pasture growth by P. D. Sears, Agrostologist in the Grasslands Division, geomorphology by Professor Cotton, a world authority, political geography by L. K. Munro, editor of the *N.Z. Herald*, the text of an address by Dr. Jobberns, our only Professor of Geography, the results of an investigation by B. J. Garnier into the "basic geographic knowledge of young New Zealanders," and several pages of notes and reviews.

BETWEEN noon and 2 p.m. on Sundays, 4ZB is presenting a new session under the title "You Asked For It." This takes in public requests and deals with anything from the classics to swing music, as asked for by listeners.

OUTSTANDING sporting events for the week are commented upon in a new Sunday morning feature, "Sporting Digest," at 11 o'clock at 4ZB. The sports announcer, Bernie McConnell, talks about various sports and performers in New Zealand and overseas.

A NEW series of entertaining stories comes from "Fate Blows the Whistle," broadcast by 4ZB on Tuesdays at 7.45 p.m. The whistle in this instance is the postman's and each week a story from a letter is dramatised.

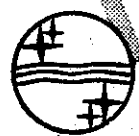
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