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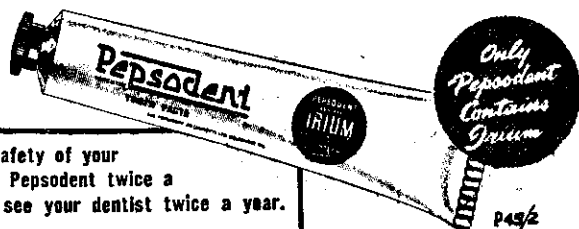


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BOOKS

POETRY FOR ADULTS

A BOOK OF NEW ZEALAND VERSE, 1923-45. Chosen by Allen Curnow. The Caxton Press, Christchurch.

(Reviewed by M. H. Holcroft)

IF it is true, as some believe, that New Zealand literature has entered a new creative period, Allen Curnow's anthology will be discussed wherever poetry and criticism are valued. Some readers will claim that the range of verse is too narrow, and that it excludes too many promising voices that have a right to be heard. Others may overlook the sustained critical effort of the introduction, and fasten upon passages which seem to them to be provocative. It becomes necessary, therefore, to discover exactly what has been attempted.

"In twenty years in a small country," writes Mr. Curnow, "few poets are to be expected, and both aim and plan of an anthology must take account of this." He did not evade the responsibilities of selection: "It was possible, and therefore seemed a duty, to look at nearly all the verse, of whatever kind or promise, printed in this country in the last 20 years." At the end of his search he found himself concentrating upon the work of 16 poets.

In his long and thoughtful introduction, Mr. Curnow examines them as individuals, finding points of resemblance and the beginnings of a common ground, but refusing to measure them against any personal or ready-made theory. Although he admits the influence of recent criticism, he does not allow himself to be tempted into a search for a thesis, and his conclusions are taken directly from the poetry.

There is one omission which I think must weaken the anthology. According to a brief explanation in a footnote, Eileen Duggan's verse was not available, and the gap is noticeable. If it is true that most of Mr. Curnow's poets are trying to make a "home for the imagination" in New Zealand, it is equally true that Miss Duggan shares the general effort—though in her case, and especially in her deeper thought, she is concerned with a transplanting of spiritual symbols, whereas the younger poets are looking for new symbols in a land that supplies no sustaining warmth of tradition. Further, Eileen Duggan has an affinity with Ursula Bethell, whose contemplative verse is deeply religious. These two women, if studied together, would have provided interesting comparisons. There is, however, a range of thought in Miss Bethell's work, and a command of words, which place her at the centre of the new movement in New Zealand verse. The extent and power of her influence are only now receiving their full recognition.

If I speak of a "movement" in verse it may be assumed that the poets are working in obedience to some aesthetic or social theory. It would be more accurate to say that there is a new and deeper phase, and that it reveals a native quality which in the past was never more than a brief and prophetic appearance. It is significant that Mr. Curnow is able to discover, without any strain upon critical probability, the elements of a general attitude in poets widely different in temperament and method.

Ursula Bethell, D'Arcy Cresswell, R. A. K. Mason, A. R. D. Fairburn, Denis Glover, Charles Brasch, and Allen Curnow are all individuals who have gone their several ways in poetic development. Nevertheless, there are meeting places. Even Arnold Wall and J. R. Hervey, who belong to the older group—as, indeed, does Miss Bethell—have touched the general themes.

The fact that all these poets, working in most cases hundreds of miles apart from one another, separated by time as well as by space, should have found for themselves the deeper meanings of isolation, and the solitudes of spirit in a land of practical people—feeling the pressure of all its past emptiness—seems to me to point to a validity of poetic experience. In just the way that our painters are finding colours in the landscape which were veiled from English eyes, so our poets are finding images and ideas that come with a sort of necessity from a background they know to be their own.

Of the better known poets in this book, only Robin Hyde failed to reach a consistency of outlook; and even she, in her vigorous and colourful "Journey from New Zealand," seemed to be at the point of arrival. A second exception may possibly be J. C. Beaglehole, whose "Considerations on Certain Music of J. S. Bach" is an unexpected gift to New Zealand verse. This group of poems, beautiful and disciplined, can at least support Mr. Curnow's claim that poetry now requires an "adult approach." Yet in one of Beaglehole's other pieces, when the music of Bach is out of his head, a thought surprises him on a lonely road; and he, too, feels the shadow of that "primeval, all-embracing forest."

Mr. Curnow's judgments are interesting and balanced; he writes of other poets with an insight into creative processes which makes the criticism responsible. Nevertheless, there is room for differences of opinion. I think he may have found too much in Cresswell's "Lyttelton Harbour." There is a recognisable emotion in these sonnets for those who know "Present Without Leave," and in spite of the impediments of the diction some lines and images are irresistible. But Mr. Curnow believes that in the best of the sonnets the "archaisms" noticed by E. H. McCormick "become a living speech." My own impression is that the influences of other and older poets have been imperfectly absorbed; and it is these intruding influences, rather than the archaisms, which prevent a complete union of ideas and language.

The transitions are a little too noticeable from Wordsworth ("Even as when I stand before you now, You constant hills and you abiding streams") to Milton (" . . . Keep what I did sell In my sore need, some laurels of poor sort") and onwards to Pope ("My verse descend! The town's but sorry sport"). It is true, of course, that something of the New Zealand landscape does emerge from these poems, even though "Phoebus" shines above it; but impressions that come from Lyttelton via Grasmere and Twickenham seem to me to lose too much energy of communication. I know that literal quotation from other poets is sanctioned by a practice that goes back at least to Milton; but