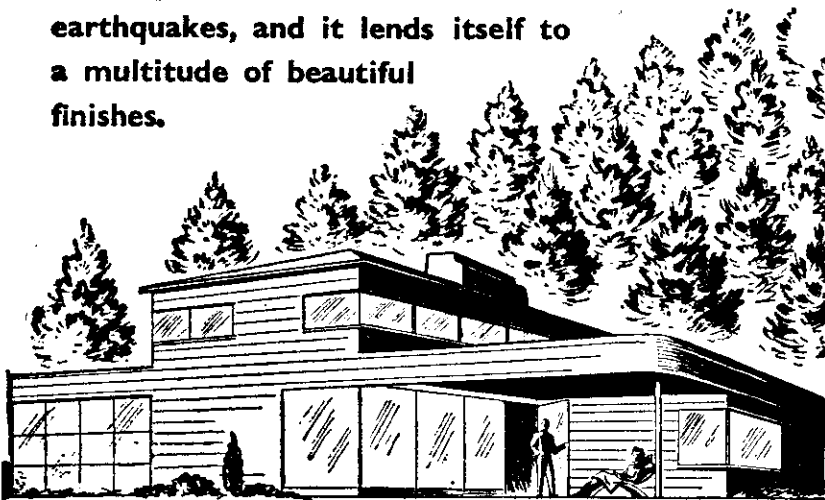


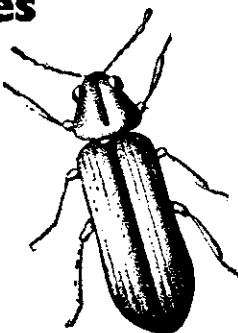
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BOOKS

THE ESSAY IN NEW ZEALAND

"TIMELESS WORLD."—A Collection of Essays by M. H. Holcroft. The Progressive Publishing Society, Wellington.

(Reviewed by Alan Mulgan)

NEW ZEALAND has not done badly in the essay. The number and quality of our essayists may be traced in part to the tradition of sound writing which the pioneers brought with them and fostered. If a community can have two births, it may be said that New Zealand had one in a library. In a pioneering society where book publishing is very difficult, the essay is one of the easier forms of expression. True, it is not quite so easy as poetry to get into print, for editors—especially provincial ones—find a few verses handy to fill up a column, but editors who have a literary bent may often be persuaded to publish an anniversary article on Robert Burns, or a comparison between Tennyson and Browning, or a nostalgic study of spring in England as compared with spring in New Zealand. Perhaps the editor, acting on the principle that the publicity he gives is sufficient reward, does not pay the essayist, and perhaps the essayist, if he is young and innocent, accepts this explanation as sufficient.

Here this sort of writing developed in a society that contained a considerable proportion of men and women with a taste for letters. The attention of those who complain that New Zealand is weak in literary journals may be directed to the relatively small circulation of such journals in Britain and to the mortality among them. I suggest that the proportion of our people who care for literature and literary criticism is at least as high as it is in the Homeland. One result of the inevitable paucity in New Zealand of periodicals with a special literary flavour has been to send the essayist to the newspaper, and it is to the credit of the New Zealand press that it has given him quite a welcome. All, or nearly all, our best essayists have written for the daily press. Naturally the more or less discursive essay of the lighter kind has been the most acceptable, but heavier metal has often been fired from the page. In a warm appreciation of the conditions he found in Christchurch, an exchange Professor from England instanced the Literary Page of *The Press*, and mentioned that he had read there an article on Jan Smuts' "Philosophy of Holism," which must have been a strange and tough dish for many a reader. When it comes to publication in book form, the factor of our small population comes in, as it does in so many other activities. People will buy stories much more readily than collections of essays. However, New Zealand publishers have put out a good many such collections, and a few have been accepted by London houses.

Yes, we have some reason to be proud of our essayists, and Monte Holcroft's latest volume strengthens this feeling. Mr. Holcroft is the weightiest of our essayists. He made his name by his lengthy Centennial prize-winning essay *The Deepening Stream*, which was a study

of New Zealand culture, and has established itself as an indispensable book on the subject. His second volume, *The Waiting Hills*, is a consideration of various aspects of New Zealand life. In this the same deep philosophical treatment is used. In his third volume, *Timeless World*, a collection written, with one exception, between the beginning of 1933 and the end of 1936 and printed in the Christchurch Press, Mr. Holcroft explores another field. There are references here and there to New Zealand, as when he says that in one way we are not isolated enough, because "for the mass of people in these days news has taken the place of thought," and we have "little chance of resisting the pressure of Fleet Street and Hollywood."

And so there comes to me this rather chastening thought: that we wait so long for the true New Zealand imprint upon our literature, not because we are too young, but because we have been robbed of our youth. Our development began in the 19th century. If only Captain Cook had come this way in Shakespeare's time!

The subjects of these essays, however, belong to the great world, and many of them have been discussed times without number in articles and books—"Climate and Literature," "The Ladies of Sulaco" (Conrad's "Nostromo"), "Manzoni's Italy," "The Primeval Heath," "Dean Inge and Mysticism," "The Fear of Death," "Coleridge," "A Novelist's Workshop" (Arnold Bennett), and "The Portrayal of Character." Judged by subjects, this book might have been written in London or New York, but who shall say how much its opinions have not been shaped by our New Zealand hills and sea, our clear atmosphere, our wooden quarter-acre-section homes, our pastoral economy, our sparse population, and our struggle to mould our British heritage to new conditions? Be that as it may, this is an application for membership of

Atomic Energy

WE have expected surprises and events like arrows
In the valley of the future, and our eyes prepared
For the leap of the unknown and we knew that strange
Voices would call out of the heart of twilight.

BUT we knew that trees of home and paths of old
Would lead us there, and days like we have known
Would wrap us in their royalty bringing us to
Night and its unshaken ministries.

NOW we have no confidence. Can we say
To-morrow will be as to-day and life's design
Yield to our key? As free men shall we walk.
Or bent and broken under the arch of power?

WHEN the clouds acknowledge a new shepherd and when
The time is driven to desperate goals we shall turn
To song like a sudden prophet pure from the fields
Affirming above the dismay the rule of love
Even against this new and stormy banner.

—J. R. Hervey.