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BOOKS

A PRISONER LOOKS BACK

IN PRISON, by Ormond Burton. A. H. and A. W. Reed, Wellington.

IF this is not a best-seller I will take to chess—with the author as instructor. (See page 103.) I will also, if the thing is a flop, agree (as I don't now) that a good book can be killed by bad production. (See the cover, the paper, the binding, the drab effect generally.) But in the meantime I stand firm as a prophet. For in the first place we all ought to read it, and are therefore committed in our consciences. If we send a man to prison and then refuse to know what happens to him there, we are just cowards and humbugs, and at least half-way on the road to tyranny. In the second place, if we read it and don't find it interesting, we are dull dogs, and had better pretend to enjoy it if we don't. It is not merely an important social document: it is as entertaining as every story is of a man who suffers strange experiences without losing his sense of humour; and is also of course an adventure story—the record of a journey into the unknown. After all, not many of us have been in prison. We have not been there even as visitors, and if we have been for another reason there is usually another reason still why we should keep the story to ourselves. But this is a story we are free to read because it did not happen to us. Besides, it happened *because* of us—because the author made trouble for us during critical days and we knew of no other way of dealing with him than by locking him up. I think he was properly locked up in all the circumstances; but it is very important to know what happened to him after we turned the keys on him.

Well here is the story told without any bitterness or exaggeration or recrimination, and with no more spiritual pride than must be allowed any man whose only defence against what society does to him is a deep conviction that he is right and society wrong. Ormond Burton has not lost that conviction, or the slightly irritating habit of making it known; but not half of his story, or a quarter, or even 10 per cent., is a personal apologia. He writes about himself chiefly to give his story the authority of personal experience. His subject is never what happened to him in particular but what happened to him and some hundreds of others, and is still happening to them. It is a study of the New Zealand prison system since about 1940, but is so thorough, so fair, so reasonable, and so entertaining that it makes nonsense of all other attempts to get imprisonment into the heads of ordinary people. Although it is critical it is tolerant, intelligent, thoughtful, and fresh, and will do more good than 10 Commissions and all the reforming resolutions passed since the beginning of the century. Nor would I, if I were the Controller-General, lose one hour's sleep over it. Nearly all the evils complained of are customs or rules of no fundamental importance—they can therefore be changed without loss of face—and the picture as a whole is very much pleasanter than most readers will have expected. Brutality just does not

exist; and although evils exist for which there is no excuse at all—filthy cells, for example, in police station lock-ups—the most painful memory the author has of physical discomfort is the cold dreariness of wet Saturdays at Mount Crawford. That would not depress me if I were the Controller; but I would build shelter-sheds and authorise fires.

—O.D.

SHORT STORIES

THE HORSE WITH THE DELICATE AIR, and other stories, by George Joseph. Harry H. Tembs, Ltd.

THE student of the short story will find in this anthology traces of the influence of Damon Runyon, H. E. Bates, O. Henry, and de Maupassant. He will not find anything as good as the legacy these writers have left us—which would be expecting too much—but neither will he find anything as good as much that has already been written in this genre by contemporary New Zealanders. We are entitled to expect, in one of George Joseph's attainments, a quality of self-criticism which he has obviously not yet acquired. A good short story demands good writing, and the writing here is not as good as the author could have made it. The plots are almost all banal; some evoke vague memories of other writers. *The Horse with the Delicate Air* is itself reminiscent of a film. To write "Micawber" backwards and use the result as the name of a character, to hang a story on "Dalvadore Sale, king of the impressionists," these are devices of the adolescent.

DEFAULTERS' DETENTION

PENALTIES ON CONSCIENCE, by Lincoln Efford. Caxton Press, Christchurch.

THIS is the best survey of the problem of conscientious objection that has so far appeared in New Zealand. In spite of his burning convictions, which he knows that very few share, the author writes with restraint, and with respect for the convictions of other people. He has also had the wisdom to employ a printer who could be trusted to tempt the reader typographically. It is not one of those shabby pamphlets in which so many forlorn cases end, but an attractive booklet of 60 pages arranged to make reading easy. Nor is it merely an argument. It is that primarily—an argument against war and the "social systems and modes of thought that make for war." But it is also a pamphlet of reference—a carefully compiled record of the steps taken by the Government and people of New Zealand between 1939 and 1945 to deal with those who refused, on conscientious grounds, to serve in the armed forces.

"Madman's Island"

STATION 3YA is about to begin a new serial which will be heard at 2.45 p.m. on Sunday afternoons—*Madman's Island*, from a book by Ion L. Idriess, the Australian writer. The first episode will be heard on Sunday, November 4. *Madman's Island* tells of the adventures of two castaways on a tropic island, their incredible hardship and privation, their thrilling evasions of death by inches and seconds.