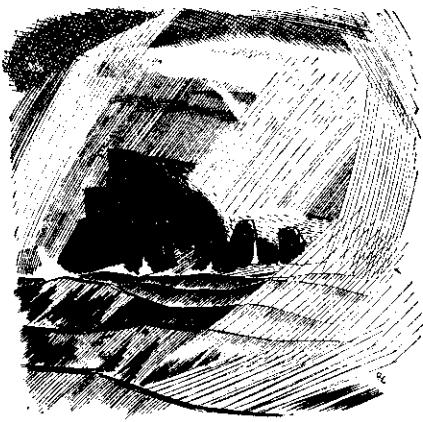


SOUNDINGS IN DEEP SEAS



The Matured Scholarship of M. H. Holcroft

world, with green fields beyond the orchard trees, a line of willows under the nearest ridge of hills, and my personality suddenly distinct from the colour and drifting shadow and murmuring sands of a summer afternoon."

Like many another young New Zealand writer, Mr. Holcroft did not find here the conditions suited to his vocation. He left these shores. At what age and precisely for what reasons we do not know, but the probable circumstances may be guessed: the ambition conceived perhaps in schooldays; the laborious accumulation of a third-class fare; the painful

ONCE a writer has assembled behind him a substantial body of work, one begins to ask of each fresh addition to it: where does this stand in relation to what has gone before, and where is it leading? One takes note of the manner in which personal themes and preoccupations have developed from their early origins. One watches the growth (or decline) of the writer's control of his medium, of his technical skill. If the work is of sufficient stature, one seeks for signs of increasing maturity—not always shown in a greater tranquillity but in a deeper and surer understanding of the particular microcosm which the writer has chosen for his own. One acquires, too, an interest in the writer himself, in the man or woman who has thus striven for self-expression through the torturing medium of words.

For a New Zealand writer, we are reminded by the fly-leaf of *Encircling Seas*,^{*} Mr. Holcroft has been unusually productive. His list of published work now stands at three novels, three long reflective essays, and a book of critical studies. Mr. Holcroft is beginning to assume the stature of a man of letters. If honours are not exactly showering upon him, they are being sprinkled with all the liberality we are, as yet, prepared to confer on literature. He has made for himself a career in the most honourable sense of that degraded word. It is timely that we should look back along the road he has travelled and perhaps hazard a guess as to his immediate, if not his final, destination.

Nor in our quest must be ignored Mr. Holcroft, the man. And here, though we do not wish to pry impertinently, we are entitled, I think, to use whatever evidence about the author's life we are able to deduce from his writings as well as those facts of biography which he has chosen to place on record.

MR. HOLCROFT, we learn from a few passages in his longer essays, passed his childhood and youth in New Zealand. The impressions gathered in those years were, he has told us, powerful and indelible. In *Encircling Seas* he describes, for example, the incident when he first became aware of personal identity: "I can still see the gravel beneath my four-year-old feet as I stood near the gateway of my home and asked myself how I came to be in that particular



but exultant moment of departure; the journey overseas, broken, we infer, by an interlude in Australia; the arrival at Southampton or Tilbury (magic words, drab experience); the cabin trunk, with its meagre wardrobe and pile of manuscripts; then the first intoxicating days in London—a blur of impressions, new but strongly familiar. The experience has been too common, it has been described in one form or another too often for us to suppose that Mr. Holcroft's differed from it in any important respect.

BUT Mr. Holcroft won an early success that few migrant writers have equalled. Between 1928 and 1931 he published three works of fiction, a feat of some magnitude for an unknown writer in the harsh competition of the literary capital. It would be idle to pretend that these books have any great intrinsic merit, but they cannot be passed over in any estimate of Mr. Holcroft's career. One might briefly characterise them by saying that they have no apparent connection with the author of *Encircling Seas* and that they could have been converted with ease into "scripts" or "scenarios" for typical moving pictures of that time (and of the present time for all I know to the contrary). They are written with a certain competent fluency and the third book, *Brazilian Daughter*, shows some advance on its predecessors, relying rather less on coincidences and meaningless "action." I hazard a guess, based on Mr. Holcroft's fine essay in *Timeless World*, that the superiority of this novel may be attributed to the ennobling influence of Conrad. But it is far removed indeed from *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo*.

Detailed analysis of Mr. Holcroft's first published works would be unprofitable, but it is worth noting that the set-

tings are more or less remote and exotic—the Solomons (a version of those isles that would cause Pacific servicemen to wonder), Java, the lesser-known regions of Brazil, the Australian interior, Sydney. English scenes, ranging from cottages to country houses, occur fairly often. There is no reference to New Zealand. (Knowing literary agents, conveniently ignoring Katherine Mansfield, used to tell us the British public wasn't interested in New Zealand.) As one finds in a great deal of popular fiction (notably in detective stories), the reader is often subjected to a rather gross form of flattery by the assumption that he, along with the principal characters, is a member of a moneyed and privileged class. There is a reference to one personage in *Brazilian Daughter* who is the luckless inheritor of a fortune "depleted to an income of a few hundreds." In brief, this fiction was designed largely for commercial purposes.

ON the evidence of these books it might have seemed safe to prophesy for Mr. Holcroft a moderately successful career, yielding in time a regular income, perhaps a half-inch entry in *Who's Who*, and that measure of immortality conferred by the fiction morgue of the British Museum. He might well have been for our time the counterpart of H. (B. Marriott Watson, that tireless exponent of fashions in popular fiction for a past generation. But Mr. Holcroft, to the profit of his native country and to his lasting honour, chose a more arduous course. He returned to New Zealand. It might be said that he returned because he had failed, because worldly success had eluded him. There is a suggestion of this in a moving passage of autobiography in *The Waiting Hills*. There Mr. Holcroft speaks of himself as coming back third-class, "like so many other New Zealanders who go abroad to their fortunes." But this explanation is not sufficient. In the same passage he remarks that he had come home feeling that his work abroad had not been finished. It is fairly clear that he was dissatisfied with what he had already achieved; he had reached the conclusion, perhaps not then wholly conscious, that he was ill-equipped to be a writer in any serious sense, that he did not know enough, had not read enough, had not thought or felt enough, that a period of self-education and self-discipline was necessary before he could go on.

These suppositions are, at any rate, borne out by the work of the next period, a group of literary essays, written between 1933 and 1936 and collected last year in the volume, *Timeless World*. In a foreword, Mr. Holcroft explains that the essays are linked by "a common theme—the interest of a practising writer in the deeper implications of authorship," and adds that while he was writing them he was also pro-

(continued on next page)



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