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"ENCIRCLING SEAS"

(continued from previous page)

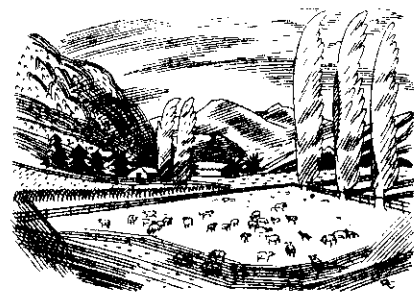
borne out in an illuminating and wholly convincing study of D'Arcy Cresswell, a poet whose life-work may be interpreted as a single minded, if erratic, search for the spiritual experience denied him by the misfortune of birth in this "Antipodean Hades." Cresswell joins that select group of writers who have been the subject of Mr. Holcroft's sympathetic appraisal.

In the final chapter, "Tides of the Mind," Mr. Holcroft courageously sets out to show the existence of the supernatural—or whatever other name may be given to intimations of a longer and purer existence." This fundamental and eternal question must, he says, have an individual answer, and the "proof" he himself adduces, is drawn from the evidence of authorship, including his personal experience. Studying in turn a group of writers—Katherine, Mansfield, Dante, Shelley—he demonstrates reasons for "a belief in a spiritual life which pervades our earthly life, and which demands from us an attention to horizons far wider than those that are bounded by the hills and the sea." I leave to more competent reviewers the examination of this subtle and at times obscure argument. I find it significant that Mr. Holcroft, elsewhere the exponent of a social doctrine of literature, has concluded that a serious writer composes not consciously for the benefit of the community but driven by some irresistible inner compulsion. I also find it significant that a writer whose early work was produced in the shadow of Fleet Street and Hollywood should now regard authorship in elevated, indeed transcendental terms. Only in this perspective can we appreciate the quality and extent of his achievement.

IN one of his personal asides, Mr. Holcroft expresses the "hope" that the work which began with *The Deepening Stream* is now ended. It has been a heavy labour, though (we know from his final chapter) richly rewarding to him personally and, in its extension of our mental frontiers, of the greatest value to ourselves. From the facts we have already assembled, I think we may fairly regard the trilogy as a by-product of his career as an imaginative writer, and here is a parallel between Mr. Holcroft's views on D'Arcy Cresswell and his own situation. With good reason, Mr. Holcroft considers that Cresswell is more "triumphantly a poet" in his prose writings than in the verse to which the prose is supposed to form an appendage. In a rather similar way, Mr. Holcroft, in the course of his development as a novelist, has produced his apology, his *Prelude*, which is unquestionably far superior to any of his published fiction. This does not diminish the value of the essays, but it does raise an important question in relation to Mr. Holcroft's future. Is it not conceivable that in the process of perfecting himself as a writer he has destroyed or damaged his capacity to write fiction? It is at least certain that, if in his next phase he returns

to the novel, the result will be very different from that of his apprenticeship. The element of plot is not likely to be important, and we may be sure there will be no false heroics. There is, of course, the philosophical novel, and Mr. Holcroft may find in that literary form a mode of expression that blends his two dominant interests. Or he may expand into a systematic critical study the tantalising short studies of New Zealand writers scattered through his essays. Or again he may develop that rich vein of autobiography that has cropped up in all his work through the past decade. We hope, indeed, that he will do all these things.

IT is a sign of our poverty that we want Mr. Holcroft to turn himself into a publishing house; but we have still further demands to make. It is doubtful whether there is anyone in this country who has done more than he to assimilate the best elements of our western heritage and apply them to our own conditions. In considering New Zealand problems he draws easily on the great resources of European civilisation—Plato, Dante, Frazer—but he does not do so to the exclusion of our own



poets and thinkers—Ursula Bethell, Katherine Mansfield, D'Arcy Cresswell. He writes a traditional English prose, but a local image—"like eroded hillsides in a cloudless sky"—comes naturally to his pen. An ideal University of New Zealand would be expected to perform this very function—to blend the past with the near and present, while preserving always a proper sense of values. University reform is in the air, and we could conceive of no better person than Mr. Holcroft to direct the school of New Zealand studies recently advocated by the wisest of our educators, F. L. Combs. That particular ideal is, however, remote, and Mr. Holcroft might be reluctant to exchange his southern fastness permanently for an academic centre. As a compromise, may we suggest that one of the colleges invites him to give a course of lectures of his own choice, ultimately providing them with a wider public through the University Press?

At this point we are reminded that we might never have known the work of Mr. Holcroft's maturity had it not been for the discernment and enterprise of the Caxton Press. They have printed all four of his latest books and published the first and the last. Good paper and beautiful type are, in *Encircling Seas*, appropriately accompanied by permanent binding.