

THE CRITIC ON THE HEARTH

CREATIVE WRITING IN NEW ZEALAND, by J. C. Reid. (Printed for the Author by Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd.).

THESE MODERN WRITERS, by Elizabeth Hamill (Georgian House, Melbourne).

(Reviewed by David Hall)

A NEW country is also an old country. There is, after par-turition, a moment of pause, a growing up. The child may or may not be left to fend for itself. We remember the French of Canada full of the surviving forms of 17th Century France, and the Elizabethan idioms still in use in some mountain regions of the United States.

Our own culture has been continuously renewed from England. Since we read the latest books from London, our own literature, even when most distinctively national, still remains marginal. Though the child can walk, and at times can hop, skip, and jump with the best of them, it has difficulty in maintaining a vigorous and independent life of its own. Tradition simultaneously inspires and inhibits. The public tends to read third-rate books imported from overseas more readily than much better books by New Zealanders.

If the task of the writer is hard in these circumstances, that of the critic is harder still. J. C. Reid (who pays a deserved tribute to his most distinguished predecessor in this field, E. H. McCormick) shows his good taste rather more in his selection of authors to criticise than in his judgments passed upon them. He is serious, deliberate and comprehensive. But his work is less valuable than it might be, because of a curious dual standard which seems unconsciously to have pervaded it. He criticises on literary grounds, but he also evaluates some authors on grounds of religious faith. This is a point of view which can be defended, but Mr. Reid would do better to be frank in recognising such a predilection in himself.

Mr. Reid has sometimes a felicitous phrase. Jackson Barry "tells his tale in a rushing colloquial style, highly-coloured and reminiscent of the friendly bellowing of a large animal." But often he is content with epithets less sharply felt, and at times lapses into the flat and the grotesque: "Only future generations can judge whether the present activity is the activity of blinded rats in a barrel or the striving of buried rabbits towards the light."

ELIZABETH HAMILL, in her survey of modern literature, remembers the creative aspect of the critic's task: no critic, she thinks, can do work of any value unless he has himself experienced, in some degree, the difficulties of the writer.

This Australian critic incidentally has a word to say about Australian writers who face the identical difficulties of writers in this country. There is one difference: they seem to enjoy better support from the general public, which is more self-consciously Australian, parochial or not, than we are New Zealand.

Elizabeth Hamill writes with vigour and gusto. She gives the full background of modern literature—the influence of the 19th Century French, the contributions of anthropology and psychology to the present climate of opinion, and the effects of shifting political thought. She is both lucid and, informative, if never inspired, about Joyce, Lawrence, Huxley, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, and the Auden-Spender group of poets, and follows fashion in over-praising E. M. Forster. She is not always up to date in matters of detail, and Chapter 13, all about music, is included for no discernible reason. But she knows

"what ticks" in a creative artist, and has evidently been able to convey her own enthusiasms to her Australian W.E.A. audiences.

I feel sure she would wish to class herself with the intelligent if disillusioned rat, rather than with the oh-so-striving rabbit.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

POSSESS ME NOT. By Fan Nichols. Inevitable Press, Wellington.

THE dust-jacket may well be quoted as a notable contribution to the Deathless Prose Department: "This is a powerful novel that digs deep into the uncensored depths of a man's heart and soul and mind. The man is Erik Nor-gard, an artist—passionate, rugged, and impetuous. . . . There is a challenge in this book that cannot go unheeded as, with vividness and sensitivity, Miss Nichols dramatically portrays the deterioration of a man's inner being under the restraint of feminine possessiveness. Here is a novel with so much realism, so much stark drama, such striking psychological implications, that it may well have a tremendous impact on the lives of its readers."

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