

POETS AT THE BBC

HOW the financial problems of authorship (which have been discussed recently in "The Listener's" correspondence columns) have been solved by a number of British poets—with profit to themselves and pleasure to British listeners—is explained in the article below. The illustrations are taken from "Picture Post."

POETRY, of all the fine arts, is the least remunerative in the 20th Century, and men who feel a compulsion to put the best efforts of their minds into it are obliged to find some employment that will give them what their published verse will not—an income to live on. In Britain, it happens that there is a corner for them, at the BBC. A number of poets whose works are keenly read in New Zealand—though not widely—are, in fact, regular frequenters of Broadcasting House. Louis MacNeice, William Empson, Dylan Thomas, and Roy Campbell all work for the BBC—some on the staff, some as casuals. They feel that the BBC offers them jobs they like, jobs that don't clash with the ideas they want to be free to carry in their heads.

At Broadcasting House they work as producers, script-writers, news-editors, or whatever they are paid for doing in an ordinary way, which earns them bread-and-butter. Patric Dickinson, whose name is now well known to New Zealand listeners as the producer of the *Book of Verse* programmes, is the BBC's Poetry Editor. He maintains that it is more difficult to be a poet at the present time than ever before in the history of literature. He finds that when he wants to write he is forced by the routine nature of his job to do something else. He is responsible for the *Time for Verse* programme, which goes on the air every Sunday night in Britain, and for other regular poetry programmes. He has more or less fixed

Minotaur (a dramatic poem for radio) was in his mind for nearly a year before he wrote anything down. After that he worked every free evening until it was finished. His case is like that of many poets, inside and outside the BBC. They have to do two jobs at once.

William Empson was born in 1906, and has been a lecturer in English literature in both China and Japan. He went back to England in 1939. His poems are not easy to read, but complex and at times obscure.



THREE POETS: At top, Roy Campbell, who is a talks producer in the BBC's Home Service. Above, Patric Dickinson (with the actress, Flora Robson) at work as the BBC's Poetry Editor. Left, William Empson, news editor, Eastern Service



office hours in which he has to read through published and unpublished verse, answer correspondence, get in touch with readers for his programmes, arrange rehearsals, and generally fix up all the administrative side of his job as Poetry Editor.

Poems in the Head

But he still writes verse. For him, and for the others, and for most modern poets, it's a question of carrying a poem round until it has to be written down. Dickinson's main work, *Theseus and the*

Roy Campbell is 45, and comes originally from Durban. He has lived in France, Spain, and Portugal. He published *The Flaming Terrapin* in 1924, and later *The Wayzgoose* (A South African satire), and *Adamastor*, a collection. In his latest book he answers criticism of his sympathies with Franco during the Spanish Civil War.

Dylan Thomas (whose voice has been heard in *Book of Verse* programmes here) is a non-staff reader and writer. He was born in 1914, and made a reputation as a poet before he was 20. He has written for newspapers and films, but in his verse he regenerates the old poetic themes of birth, love, and death, in exciting language, which has a lot of the Bible and the singing of his native Wales in it.

Louis MacNeice is an Irishman, born in 1907. He is a classical scholar and University lecturer, and has worked as a feature writer and producer at the BBC since 1941, when he did the series *The Stones Cry Out*. His poems (among them *Autumn Journal*, a long poem published as one book) reflect the political and social uncertainties of modern life.

John Arlott is 32, and writes about things everyone can see—country fairs

or cricket matches. Fundamentally, he is concerned with the impressions made on his mind by ordinary things. His most recent work is a sonnet-sequence on a Roman Clausentum near Southampton. He is a talks producer in the Eastern Service and broadcasts cricket commentaries to India.

James Monahan, born in 1912, is an assistant director. He was a journalist before serving in the Commandos, and now works on the European Service. Much of his verse has a quiet, unwarlike quality.

Rayner Heppenstall, a producer, is a Yorkshireman, 35 years old. He is interested in witchcraft and anything with mystery in it, and has written two novels and a book on the ballet.

Geoffrey Dearmer, an Assistant Director, born in 1893, was a war poet of the first world war. He has been examiner of plays to the Lord Chamberlain (England's stage censor), and writes novels as well as verse.

Patric Dickinson himself was born in 1914, and left Cambridge to be a schoolmaster. He was badly wounded in the war, and wrote BBC war propaganda before taking his present job.