

FEBRUARY 14, 1947

Life Without Art

IN the Phaidon book of Canadian art, reviewed on Page 30 of this issue, there is this bold declaration by the "Group of Seven" who made Canadian painting Canadian. "Art must grow and flourish in a country before that country becomes a real home for its people." Art is of course a wider term than painting and was perhaps not used in its widest sense when that declaration was made in Toronto. But although many people are not consciously interested in art, and not even receptive to it in any sense of which they are aware themselves, the declaration in its fullest sense is true. Whatever else art is, it is the communication of emotion, the fears, the hates, the loves, the reverences that make life what it is and ourselves what we are. Men can and do live in the most inhospitable places. They can even live there indefinitely without any great injury that science can detect: in the desert, in the jungle, in snow, in eternal wind, in almost unceasing rain. But such places do not become their home unless they somehow or other get into the current of their emotions. And that is always the case with young countries. They are not home until their people cease looking elsewhere for emotional satisfaction. New Zealand is not home for a dwindling but still considerable number of the people living here. For them Britain is still home, and only British things satisfy: British speech, British newspapers, British churches, British landscapes, British attitudes. It is no reflection on them or on New Zealand. It means simply that their emotions have not been captured here. But art, some manifestation of art whether we recognise it or not, changes all that. It gives life emotional content, and in proportion as it is the expression of a particular environment makes that environment home. Home is not the place where we live, but the place where we live content; and it is art, our own art, that makes it such a place. Until that happens all the emotions that give life its deepest meaning are centred on far-off things and we don't like the sound of our own voices.

NEW ZEALAND LISTENER, FEBRUARY 14

LETTERS FROM LISTENERS

WANG-AREE

Sir,—Querying the pronunciation of Whangarei, A. H. Reed remarks that residents 60 years ago called the town Wangaree; he also quotes Marsden's spelling in 1820. Might I observe here that the pronunciation given by residents to place names is not always correct. For instance, my eldest sister, born in Auckland over 96 years ago, still persists, despite my objections, in calling Remuera "Rem-you-error" (a very common error, by the way). Like Mr. Reed, I'm no Maori scholar; but my father, the late Edwin Fairburn, was. Born in Paihia in 1827, the youngest son of the Rev. W. T. Fairburn, one of Marsden's missionaries, he spent the early part of his life in close touch with the Maori race at mission stations such as Paihia, Puriri, Maraetai, etc. Later, as a civil engineer, he surveyed many of the roads north of Auckland up to the Victoria Valley. Incidentally, his eldest sister, Elizabeth Fairburn, married the Rev. W. Colenso. However, to come to the point: his pronunciation of Whangarei was neither Wanga-ray nor Wangaree. It was Whang-a-r-e-i (approximately, Wangarayee), and he was a pedant in the matter of correct pronunciation of Maori. I have in my possession some of my father's recollections of those times written a few years before his death. With these are some sketches and maps of the old missionary stations, including a very clear one of the Paihia settlement, showing the location of the houses of the various missionaries; also the exact spot where the first game of cricket was played in New Zealand (in 1833). In these recollections, which he entitled "Maharatanga," he describes the arrival of Robert Maunsell at Puriri, in 1834 and shows how closely this famous missionary began the study of the Maori language immediately after his arrival—how natives were brought into the room to give the correct pronunciation of place names and so on. My father also helped, and in return Dr. Maunsell gave him lessons in Latin grammar.

ARTHUR FAIRBURN (Mt. Eden).

RECKLESS WORDS.

Sir,—Let me thank you for your editorial of January 10, "Words Without Caution." Its wise warning against the insincere or heedless use of words can hardly be uttered too often at a time when public speeches and public acts so notoriously contradict each other.

"If way to the better there be," wrote Thomas Hardy, "it exacts a full look at the worst." And New Year hopefulness is surely vain without realisation of the spiritual morass in which our world is sunk. Though, as you point out, words are no effective substitute for virtues, the cautious and responsible use of them is at least one part of honesty. And of this your editorial is in itself a splendid example.

BASIL DOWLING (Christchurch).

RADIO VOICES.

Sir,—A stand-up clap to your views—reel commentator for his note "Hearing Voices," but I do not agree with him when he says we must wait until we have a bigger population before we have a variety of radio voices. Being an ardent listener of plays of all descriptions, I must say that "the select band" of radio actors—as your commentator so aptly describes them—have "had it." And why not follow the

example of England, America, and Australia of announcing the names of the actors before or after the play? This always makes the play (or picture) much more interesting. I suppose the names are not given because it would be a monotonous repetition of four or five voices.

"THAT MAN AGAIN" (Otaki).

REWARDS OF AUTHORSHIP

Sir,—I am grateful to A. H. and A. W. Reed for correcting the errors I fell into in my letter on the Rewards of Authorship. My figures were wrong and I apologise; but I don't feel it greatly alters the substance of the matter. The Messrs. Reed appear to have based some of their arguments on the assumption that I measure successful writing in terms of pounds, shillings and pence. I

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don't, of course, and neither am I interested, as they seem to believe, in the sort of writing that "can be done so easily." Nearly everything that is written for the sake of making money is worthless and ephemeral; but at the same time if good writing doesn't make money there is always the danger that writers may be forced to stop writing because family responsibilities make them concentrate on other ways of earning a living. The number of promising young writers in New Zealand who have disappeared from view after a few years shows that this has often happened in New Zealand (and of course general indifference in every other way speeds the process).

Good writing can make money, and in large countries it often does, but even more often it sells no better than third-rate westerns (and makes less money because it takes longer to write). Royalties on sales don't discriminate between good and bad, and won't until we are sufficiently educated to want to read good books instead of just books. Therefore they actively encourage writers to write badly, because it is easier to write badly. I know that any solution I might propose is likely to be impracticable, but the problem is still there.

Most of the other points A. H. and A. W. Reed make are bound up with it. It is true that New Zealanders can be published overseas, but only to a limited extent, and then usually only if they pander to the popular taste of the moment. Much of the self-consciousness that has afflicted New Zealand writers has been due to their conviction that this country must be explained to readers who don't know it. When they are writing for their own countrymen they can take the local colour for granted and get on with more important things; and for this reason and many others work that is important to New Zealand and to New Zealand literature should be published here. As for Messrs. Reed's assertion that "the New Zealand writer has open to him the columns of his own newspapers, periodicals and books," how many of those columns are open to writers with ambitions above journalism and pot-boiling?

DENNIS McELDOWNEY

(Christchurch).

NOTICE TO CORRESPONDENT

L. K. Paine (Hamilton): The play has not been reviewed in our columns. We cannot therefore print comment upon it.