

BROTHERS ACROSS THE TASMAN

MODERN AUSTRALIAN POETRY. Selected by H. M. Green. Melbourne University Press.

MEANJIN PAPERS, Spring 1946. Melbourne University Press.

(Reviewed by David Hall)

IF you stumble over the sandhills on the south side of Sydney, down towards Botany Bay, you will notice a dark, oily-looking scrub growing. This reptilian vegetation (if that phrase is possible) seems entirely appropriate to its surroundings, that empty waste land of golf courses, factories, and promiscuous dumps of old, rusting metal. One day in October, however, you will perhaps notice that the scrub has put forth flowers, minute blossoms of an exquisite, fragile beauty, and close inspection shows that the dark foliage of the bushes is, though a monotone in colour, infinitely various in form.

Something like this has been my experience with this new anthology of modern Australian poetry. There is a lot in it I don't like. Hunting back through the book at the second reading (and verse cannot be appraised on a slighter acquaintance than that), I jotted down some opinions of the poets: "descriptive, conventional," "last war memories obsess returned man: dull and conventional," "hints of Roy Campbell," "sentimental, epigrammatic," "echoes of Housman, dull," "an unabashed Georgian, dull," yes, dull; keep it solemn, solemn, solemn. The general effect, somehow enhanced by the mildly irritating banishment of all names of authors to the end of the book and the dismal, spidery typography, is of safety at all costs—certainly at the cost of vigour. Perhaps it would have been better to have admitted something by "members of our principal extremist group, Angry Penguins."

Anger there is in this anthology, anger at the perversion of man by industrialism—James McAuley's *Blue Horses*. Indeed, these poets are at their best when they set down the great candle of uplift and take up the little peashooter of satire—A. D. Hope in *The Return from the Freudian Islands* and Brian Vrepret in *The Pleasant Future of Jones*.

If I complain about the dullness and portentous seriousness of many of these poems, their facile mysticism, their heavy burden of unpurged literary memories, I must at the same time salute with gratitude and, I hope, humility, the good qualities of some fine poets. There are many passengers in this galère, but there are some rowers here who can carry the whole boat. Besides McAuley and Hope, there is Kenneth Slessor of the lively rhythms. There is R. A. Fitzgerald (or is there?). There is Kenneth Mackenzie. But there are also the creators of the earnest, the *voulu*, the desperately determined efforts to be poetic and Australian and fashionably safe. Farewell to these, a long farewell.

THE other little gift from across the Tasman, a recent number of the Australian literary quarterly, *Meanjin Papers*, is easy to accept. Its format is graceful and distinguished. Besides the work of Australians it has contributions

from Britain, the United States, and even New Zealand (Kendrick Smithyman). In fact, the American Karl Shapiro, has written the best thing in this number, an eloquent verse letter. Some Australian poets seriously compete with him. I much prefer Judith Wright's poem printed here to those by her included in *Modern Australian Poetry*. Max Harris leads dancing apes down Collins Street —

dear Dantes in reverse
you have cursed me with your blessing,
and blessed me with your curse.

The short stories in this number are of good quality. Mona Brand's excellent *Absentee* combines simplicity of form with the most clairvoyant psychology. In *Rain* Mark Hannah tells a "straight" story with spirit and skill, and Anias Nin is macabrely fantastic.

A description by William Lester of the war experiences of James Picot, an Australian writer who died a prisoner-of-war in the hands of the Japanese, is moving. There is a good deal of balanced and penetrating criticism, both of new books and of current literary trends; perhaps the most persuasive of the critics is Sydney Musgrove. Elizabeth Hamill pleasantly satirises the whirligig of literary taste.

Meanjin Papers ("pronounced Meanjin, the accent falling on the second syllable") takes the considerable risk of reproducing a number of portraits of its contributors. I rather regret that the editor did not take the even graver risk of presenting us instead with more Australian art—in addition, that is, to the two agreeable but not wildly exhilarating line drawings here reproduced.

New Zealanders who value creative work in literature and the arts may well subscribe to *Meanjin Papers*. Besides the pleasure it will give them, its example should be an extra push forward even to the impetuous.

FOR PARENTS AND OTHERS.

ABOUT BOOKS FOR CHILDREN. By Dorothy Neal White. N.Z. Council for Educational Research in conjunction with the N.Z. Library Association.

FOR parents who take seriously their responsibilities to their children (and those who don't should not be parents at all), Dorothy Neal White's survey of what is worthwhile in children's literature is itself the most worthwhile literary investment which has appeared this year. Indeed, the only criticism which suggests itself is the rather querulous one that the book did not arrive in time to be recommended for Christmas buying—or as a guide to Christmas buying.

As the author points out, long after parents become enlightened about the food, the clothes, and the behaviour of their children, they persist in cherishing a sentimental and unrealistic attitude towards children's books. But it might also have been pointed out that this parental attitude has persisted simply because no serious attempt was made (until now) to correct it. Mrs. White is, in fact, pioneering in her own chosen sphere just as Sir Truby King did in his—and if our children are to have well-developed minds as well as healthy bodies, her field is scarcely the less important.

What the lay parent (if one may so describe him or her) will most appreciate about Mrs. White's book is its matter-of-factness. It is a practical guide, broad-based on ten years' personal experience of children's libraries, and written in a plain straightforward style. The author discusses books and periodicals as sources of entertainment and instruction, and doesn't bother her head (or the reader's) with excursions into the by-paths of child-psychology. As she points out in her chapter on poetry, the Freudians have psycho-analysed Mother Goose, and the Marxians have tried to liquidate her, without, in either instance, any effect on her popularity in the nursery.

Except for three appendices — a bibliography of children's literature, a list of longer plays for children, and a catalogue of world folk-and-fairy tales — Mrs. White provides no book-lists. She is not concerned so much with what are good books, and plays, and poems for children, as with what makes such work good. But in her assessment of values she is most liberal in citing examples, and parents who found it difficult to judge the worth of a book for themselves could keep their children happy from infancy to late adolescence merely by referring to the titles or the authors she quotes with approval. For her survey is a wide one. It begins with picture books for the very young, and in successive chapters progresses through fairy tales (ancient and modern), realistic stories for Standards 2-6, biography, social studies, books on arts and crafts, nature study and science, plays, poetry, and the specialised fields of children's magazines and encyclopaedias. All are discussed with an infectious enthusiasm which makes *About Books for Children* thoroughly pleasant as well as worthwhile reading. Its value to parents, teachers, and librarians, to uncles, aunts, and all others who have juvenile relatives is both present and permanent.

—J.M.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

BRITISH BROADCASTING. By T. O. Beachcroft. The British Council, London.

THIS is No. 25 in the series of illustrated books, *British Life and Thought*, published by the British Council. Mr. Beachcroft, a well-known short-story writer, first joined the BBC in 1924 as an announcer, and worked there during the second World War, becoming Assistant Director of Publicity. In this book, which has 22 photographs, he reviews the BBC's formation, its operation in Britain, its war-time work, and its overseas broadcasting, all in a clear and agreeable manner.

Stage Play Competition

THE Playwrights' Advisory Board of Sydney announces its third stage play competition, offering £100 in prize-money. This sum will be given either for one full-length stage play or divided among the writers of two or three plays. Entries close on September 30 and a Sydney firm has offered to publish the winning play. Leaflets giving conditions and entry forms may be obtained from Gwen Harrison, Box 4220, G.P.O., Sydney, a stamped addressed envelope to be enclosed. Each of the first two competitions brought about 80 entries from Australia and New Zealand.