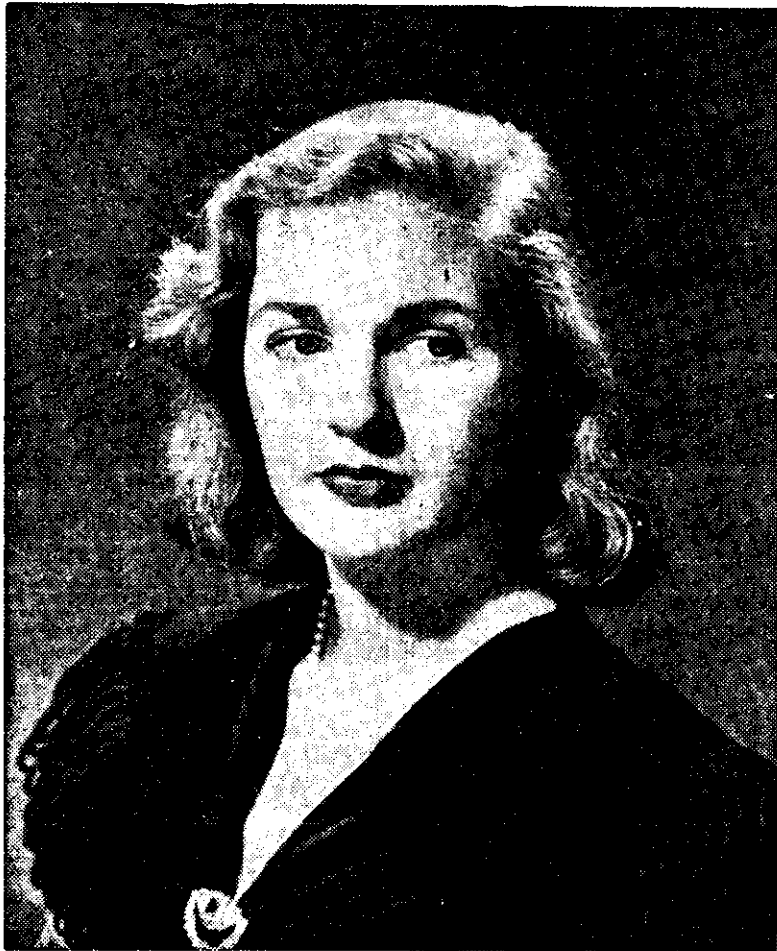


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BOOKS

THE LITTLE WORLD: Frank Sargeson's New Zealand

THAT SUMMER AND OTHER STORIES.
By Frank Sargeson. John Lehmann, London, 1946.

(Reviewed by James Bertram)

ANYONE interested in New Zealand writing who does not happen to be a Caxton collector and has failed to preserve back numbers of *Penguin New Writing* for 1944, should want to buy this book. He may not find it easy: a few advance copies sold rapidly and there have been no reinforcements—I have only a borrowed copy for review. Clearly this is an unsatisfactory situation for writer and readers alike. Londoners may have their collected Sargeson; even Parisians, who appreciate a new sensation, may buy *Cet Été-là* from an avant-garde publisher; but the author, though not without honour, is without royalties in his own country. It looks as though the State Literary Fund has just arrived in time.

FRANK SARGESON'S stories first appeared in book form in this country, and early won recognition among the discerning. But it is surely significant that they should have been a first choice for the new London publishing firm of John Lehmann Ltd., with the perhaps inevitable blurb that "No writer of comparable gifts has come from the Dominion since Katherine Mansfield." For obviously John Lehmann, a gifted if not infallible literary impresario, considers Sargeson one of his major "finds." On the record, and with the support of a number of English critics, he is well entitled to think so.

For the book itself: one might wish for a brighter format (in this respect, the Caxton Press wins hands down). This is an English austerity edition with lean margins and a drab cloth cover. And I cannot feel that John Minton has added much of realism or fantasy with his old-world dust-jacket on which a London costermonger wheels a rustic barrow down a white lane to what looks like Ilfracombe. But whatever the outside may be, inside is New Zealand.

IN addition to the short novel *That Summer* which forms its centre-piece, the book contains a choice (Mr. Sargeson's? or Mr. Lehmann's?) of 20 stories from *Conversation with My Uncle* (1936), *A Man and his Wife* (1940), and *Speaking for Ourselves* (1945). Keeping in mind the longer novel since published by the Caxton Press, this gives a representative view of ten years' literary achievement—certainly enough by which to judge a serious writer. In bulk it may not be much; and the stories here collected, though always technically interesting, will cause no revolution. Yet the book is a landmark comparable with *The Story of an African Farm* or *Capricornia*. It is one of those books that help change directions and that—in their countries of origin, at least—can never again be forgotten.

If Mr. Sargeson had written no more than these 200 pages, he would still be among the very small group of New Zealand creative writers who count for something. What, then, is the achievement that this book summarises?

In the first place, the perfecting of a deliberate and highly self-conscious craftsmanship, so finished and delicate in the shadings it gives to the most commonplace material that only Australasians, I suspect, can appreciate its full virtuosity. Where an Australian writer like Xavier Herbert handles Antipodean speech with bravura and gusto, Mr. Sargeson fingers his shabby idiom tenderly like a connoisseur. The result is a surprising verbal subtlety, incapable of brief illustration: the total effect of a good Sargeson story is very near to that of poetry. If he had been an English intellectual, one feels, he might have written rather like E. M. Forster or Virginia Woolf; being a New Zealander he writes like Frank Sargeson, and no one has ever done that before.

Given the art or craft—and it is clear that so scrupulous an instrument can only have been won painfully from inner experience—what does he do with it? On the surface, these stories are episodes and incidents and moods in the everyday life of a narrow and rather unattractive range of New Zealanders. Few of them have any obvious plot; when they have (as in *A Great Day*) they pay for it. *That Summer*, more ambitious in construction than the rest and as brilliantly handled in some of its passages as anything Mr. Sargeson has done, has a beginning and a middle: it can hardly be said to have an end, despite its haunting final cadence. Yet in its own way it is a condensed modern epic, and does for New Zealand in the Depression what *The Waste Land* did for Europe between two wars. (It has even, like Tiresias in *The Waste Land*, a bi-sexual central figure to act as pivot to the narrative, if not as chorus.) And Terry in his barrow—a sick man being wheeled away by his pal from a hospital to die—is a symbol more potent than many statistics.

Mr. Sargeson is not a moralist; nor is he a consciously political writer of the social-documentary school, though he might easily have been either one of these. *They Gave Her a Rise*, a fiercely ironical story that turns around an industrial accident, levels its charge not against a system, but against human weakness—if you like, against human nature. And the quality of Sargeson's mind and art that is probably most remarkable (as it is certainly rarest, in the literature of a young country) is its universality. He has no heroes, for he has a single hero: man. By and large he doesn't think much of him; but the indignant reader—and there will

(continued on next page)



Alan Blakey photo
SARGESON