

WRITTEN FOR RADIO

THE DARK TOWER, and other radio scripts.
By Louis MacNeice. Faber & Faber.

(Reviewed by Isobel Andrews)

WRITING for radio has been called the newest form of literary art. Instead, it could easily be looked upon as a revival of the oldest. Its method—that of transmitting mental images by sound alone—goes back to the Icelandic sagas and the tales of the troubadours, when the wandering minstrel sat in front of the huge fireplaces, or idled on the terraces, telling his tales, and using harp or lute for sound effects. Present-day radio-writing, with all the complications of the control panel and the interlocking studios to back it up, is still based on the old art form introduced so long ago.

But this revival of an ancient method is bound to be fleeting. Television is looming on the horizon. In due course writers for radio will have to grapple with the idea of a visual as well as a heard image, and this will call for a completely new technique. A technique which will lie, one imagines, somewhere in between writing for the stage and writing for the films.

In the meantime, however, we have men like Louis MacNeice writing for radio as we know it today, working on the assumption that listeners can hear and not see, so that all emphasis is still laid on sound. MacNeice is very much awake to the demands made on the conscientious radio writer, and he combines music and effects with the spoken word in a highly efficient and intelligent manner. Technically, his plays are models of just what can be done in this direction. And the fates are on his side. He can, lucky man, persuade musicians of the calibre of Benjamin Britten to compose special music for him. He has all the equipment of the BBC at his disposal. He is given a free hand at production so that his plays, as he wrote and imagined them, must go over the air as near to the original conception as is humanly possible.

IN spite of this, I found *The Dark Tower*, the main play in his new collection, disappointing. It seemed to me to be too repetitive, and I was unmoved by the content—the hackneyed theme of Man's Quest and Man's Struggle. The symbolism is fairly trite—the good and bad loves, the dark forest, the temptations, the struggle between man and his temperament, and so on. Technically brilliant, it still struck me as painstaking, or perhaps "self-conscious" might be the right word to use. At any rate it had little real warmth and feeling. I didn't care very much whether Roland got to the dark tower or not, and every now and again found myself wondering what all the fuss was about.

Although MacNeice in his preface says that he considers *The Dark Tower* his best script to date, I must confess to enjoying the less pretentious plays much better. I liked the nonsense of the two March Hare programmes, written, as the author says, on the principle of "A-little-bit-of-mud-for-everybody."



BBC photo.

LOUIS MacNEICE

"The fates are on his side"

There is a pace and energy in these two pieces which I found lacking in *The Dark Tower*, the gusto comes through the script quite naturally, and although some of the allusions might be lost on a New Zealand audience, it could be interesting to hear the March Hare plays over our own networks.

Sunbeams in His Hat was written to commemorate the anniversary of the death of Chekhov, and MacNeice says that he wrote the play deliberately to correct what he terms "the popular fallacy which uses Chekhov as a synonym for melancholia and which vitiates so many English productions of his work."

IN this play, more than in any of the others, we get a feeling that the characters, Chekhov particularly, are real people. Which brings us to the question—can the intellectual ever become the storyteller? Or will the preoccupation with the Idea always be in the ascendant over the portrayal of the humanities?

MacNeice is a man of very high academic qualifications, he has an infinite capacity for taking pains, he has an eye for detail and a fund of imagination, but he has also a detachment which makes the gift of character-drawing almost outside his ken. His figures in most cases are silhouettes, drawn against the pages of the script with clarity and precision, but lacking the depth and colour of a sympathetic oil painting.

This criticism apart, I found the book interesting, in places amusing, and, as a guide to what the radio writer can do with radio, illuminating.

FOR CHILDREN

WINKS IN WESTLAND. Written and illustrated by Ruth Northcraft: Democracy Publishing Company.

THIS fantasy for children imports fairies into the New Zealand bush, but has the advantage of being as much interested in facts of natural history as in supernatural fancies. It is a pity, though, that they printed it in purple ink.

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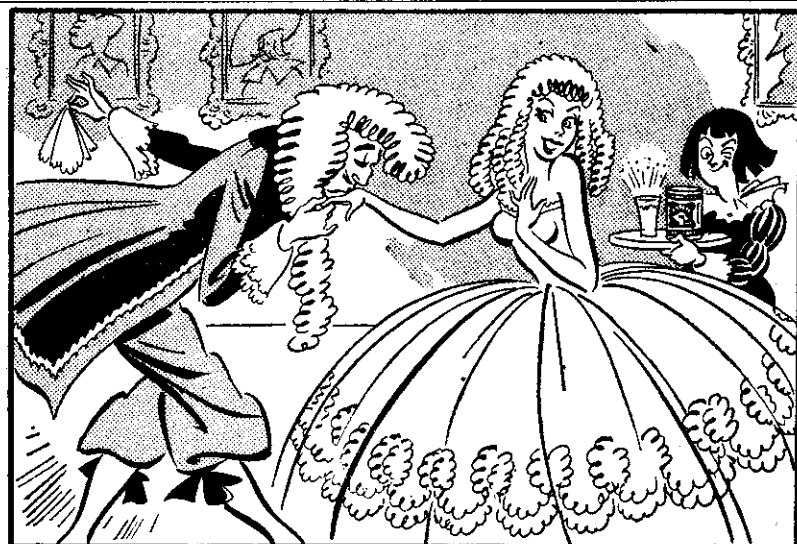
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