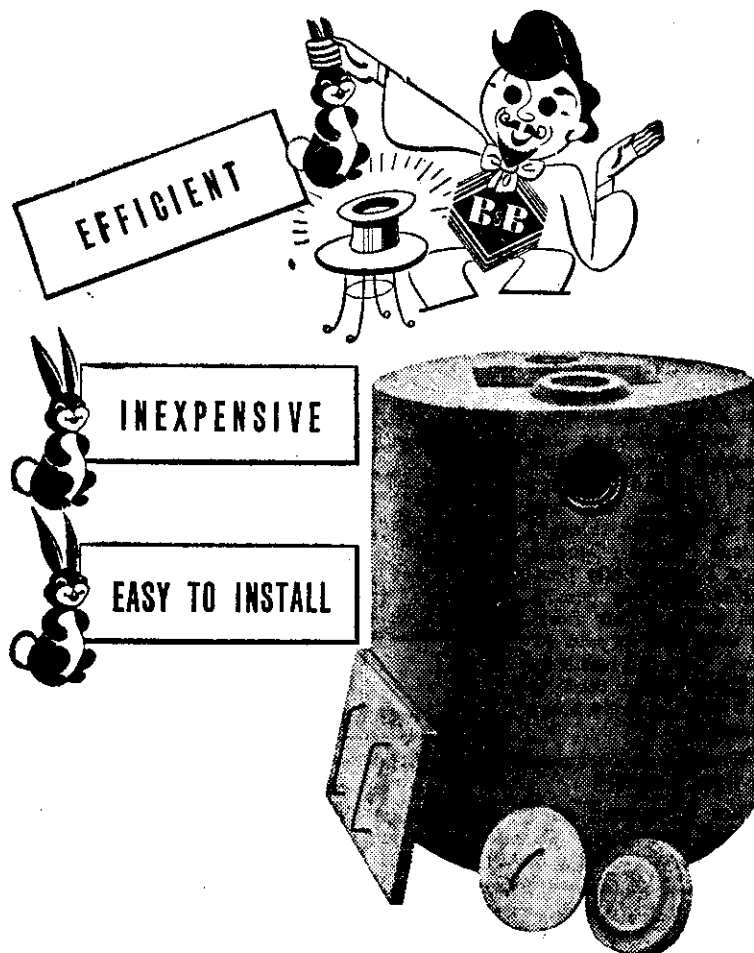


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BOOKS

The Voyage and the Story

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS. By William Hart-Smith. Caxton Press.

THE voyage this book of verse enjoins upon us is one that holds considerable excitement for the reader, even though it yields less strange discoveries than its author may perhaps have hoped. In some 40 poems William Hart-Smith writes a life of Columbus and a description of his four transatlantic voyages. The verse is episodic rather than narrative and sticks closely to the historical facts.

It might be argued that Hart-Smith, diligently following the emotional crises in the career of Columbus, could have handled the same material as a continuous epic. At times one wishes he had, because it is evident that Hart-Smith's salient merits are staying power and intellectual energy, these rather than a lyric gift or the divine marshalling of words into patterns in which the whole suddenly becomes something marvellous out of all proportion to the value of its component parts.

Mr. Hart-Smith is a straightforward poet, self-confident enough not to fear the banal and the pedestrian ("The world is flat, And that's that!"). This unassuming simplicity arms his art against the false and the pretentious. But, though his diction is, so to speak, low-gear, he is never dull. He has the same power to command the attention as the shaggy verses of John Donne without any of Donne's obscurity. If there is any *arrière-pensée*, any symbolism, in these poems, it has been buried too deep for this reader. Columbus himself may perhaps be considered an allegory, an allegory of hope fulfilled which is yet in the end turned to dust and to ashes.

His simplicity does not prevent Hart-Smith being epigrammatic in the same wry vein as Arthur Waley's translations from the Chinese. And by the adroit use of the idiom of the 15th Century the poems nostalgically suggest the aspirations of the discoverers. They are rich in irony.

We have grown weary of islands,
and would like a continent.

Sometimes they hold the observations of an acute psychologist—

— those
who do deliberate evil cannot abide
the paltry, stupid, evil a man does
who meaneth only good!

Hart-Smith is primarily an intellectual poet. It is ideas which fire him. One of the most successful poems, "The World Complete," is a close summary of geographic fact. Few poets have so successfully lost themselves in their subject and obliterated the subjective and the personal.

His use of metaphor is not uniformly happy, but, when his metaphors succeed, they gleam with their own beauty. In "Westward Seven Hundred and Fifty Leagues" (one of the best poems in the book) which begins

Standing still in the sea,
which is glass,
we are as it were timeless between
yesterday and that which comes to pass.

we find this imagery drawn from the Old Testament—

I tap the rock of our despair,
but each freshest of reason
angers only
the fire of mutiny and treason—

This is Hart-Smith's fourth volume of verse, the first he has published in New Zealand. He is an original and a mature poet, to whom poetry is an art rather than a rubbish bin for his emotions. We may expect to hear more of him.

The Caxton Press, more silent of late than one would wish, has produced another satisfyingly graceful volume.

—David Hall

LOOKING BACKWARD

THE CORRIDOR OF LIFE. By W. E. Swinton, illustrated by Erna Pinner. Jonathan Cape, London.

IN one of the early chapters of this book our earth is likened to a ping-pong ball adrift in the Atlantic. With this engaging simile to give us a sort of celestial perspective the author proceeds to take his readers on a tour of the family skeletons. We are introduced to the basic geology of the earth and there is an interesting speculation as to the manner of origin of life without, of course, anything other than the vaguest of conclusions. This problem shelved, Swinton is free to roam among the fascinating relics of past life. He does not minimise the risks of mistakes in the identification of fossil remains, nor does he deny the strong element of surmise in much of our reconstruction of them. Yet he manages to present a reasonably coherent account of the development of life against a time-scale the vastness of which he does not permit the reader to forget. That is something of a feat.

If there is one point upon which it is possible to dwell adversely it is the too lengthy detail of much of the fossil description. The book is clearly intended for the common reader and has many passages of particular interest to that very person, but a detailed discussion of comparative anatomy is not one of these.

Many readers will be surprised to find that reptiles occupy very nearly half the book. As this was the dominant form of life for nearly half the time that life itself has been upon the earth the allowance is not really excessive and we can hardly dispute the matter when the period of our dominance has been so short.

The last chapter deals with evolution and extinction and is, in a sense, a summing up of the author's conclusions as to whither man. There may be a little "writing-down" verging on bathos in the latter paragraphs, but this passage is worth more than passing attention.

We are instructed architects; the plans of the future are in our hands. . . . There is perhaps only one thing we should learn from the study of these creatures of the past . . . in the long history of vertebrate and invertebrate of life there is no group that planned deliberately, or even attempted casually, to end the race to which it happened to belong.

Warmongers, please note!

The illustrations are superb and add so much to the text as to warrant Miss

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