

WALTER DE LA MARE

IT will astonish many readers to be told that Walter de la Mare is now 75. Here is a tribute to him by EILEEN DUGGAN, broadcast the other evening by 2YA.

POETS write against the handicap of a changing language. In the long range of centuries, words written to-day may become as archaic as Chaucer's. It is a humbling thought, but none has been less daunted by that prospect than Walter de la Mare, whose last book, published in his seventies, has met with so deferential a welcome.

He has shown infinite variety in theme and in form, refusing to be bound by convention in metre, yet confessing to such respect for the sonnet that he counsels a modest hesitancy before attempting it, finding it like Chinese ginger jars where not the syrup alone but the jar is delightful.

What then is his secret, his essence? To Robert Lynd it is that undying homesickness of poets which you find in men as diverse as the authors of *The Hound of Heaven*, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, and, of course, the psalms; and which makes them return "Hating their journey, homeless, home." James Stephens, trying to place Ruth Pitter, said that her poetry belongs to no known class, but can be called pure poetry. The same detached ecstasy can be found in Walter de la Mare. Chesterton felt that the world would never lose wonders, but its tragedy would be to lose wonder. In poetry and in prose, de la Mare has a certain magic which is the adult equivalent of the silver nutmeg and the golden pear. He can

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than that—with the acquisition of a bush section by a wandering gold-miner: a solitary Englishman who never married. Whether he ever occupied his property, or tried to occupy it, I don't think I ever knew. But he included it among his assets, although others were using it, and when he died it fell to a nephew whom he had never seen and who was then a farmer in West Otago.

So far that is an ordinary tale of life and death and inheritance and broken ties. What makes it unusual from this point on is the fact that the nephew, whom I have known all my life and who is neither very rich nor very poor, has not yet claimed it or seen it. He bestirred himself sufficiently to set out to see it, and with two friends had just about reached Wataroa when the driver, through weariness, took them all over a bank. No one was hurt, nor were they yet at the end of what was then regarded as a reasonable road; but the owner began to think. How much did he want this land? How would he tell the man now in possession that his time was up? What would his position be

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WALTER DE LA MARE
"English is a marvellous fiddle"

be called creative in his own right, because where others draw from human experience and use the mind as a lens, he goes out of the body into a world of fairies, midgets, and gnomes. These can curse as well as bless. He never so abandons himself to fancy as to forget that this earth is a cockpit of good and evil; nor does he ever go so far into their country as to forget his own. "English," he wrote, "is a marvellous fiddle, echoing almost in every sentence one says or writes with many tongues . . . while the words of which it is made were rooted in the soil of the people and were brought to ripeness by the dews and rains and suns of the northern heavens." And again, "The English love light," and weary sometimes of winter because it shortens the days. He said that he remembered only one season as cold as the terrible winter after the war. He was in England all through the war, and said that the way in which dangers and difficulties were confronted and surmounted seemed to him miraculous. To realise their magnitude one had only to ride for half-an-hour on a London bus. In one of

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on the Coast if he asserted his rights and pushed the other man out?

The more he thought the more uneasy he became, and when a settler arrived with horses to pull them back on the road he was told to face the car north.

* * *

I GREATLY regretted, when I found myself so near the scene, that I had not provided myself in advance with a map and some recent facts to reinforce my memory. But it was only when I reached Wataroa that I remembered the story, which I heard first from the man who drove the car off the road, and I did not feel free all these years afterwards to put questions to local settlers. But this I clearly recall—that the decision to return without claiming the land was somehow associated in my mind, when I first heard about it, with the story, well-known to all of us, of the runholder who had left our district for Mexico when we were boys at school and been shot there for attempting to enclose grazing lands that had never been fenced before.

(To be continued)

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* * *

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(Signed) Noel Burrell.

* * *

Fencourt, Cambridge,
3rd Dec., 1947

Alfred Jenkins,
22 Manners St., Wellington.
Dear Sir,—I must say that I wished I had done this course long before now as it makes one feel as though life is really worth living. I can say that I have never felt fitter before and consider that every young chap should take this course, as it most certainly builds one up.—Yours faithfully (Signed) John Hogan.

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