

BOOKS

LIFE ABOUNDING

ROADS FROM HOME. By Dan Davin.
Michael Joseph, London. New Zealand
price, 9/6.

(Reviewed by Frank Sargeson)

IT is probably worth noting that a review of a New Zealand novel may be as difficult to write as the novel itself. The labour will not, of course, be nearly so prolonged, but in each case the difficulties will be similar. And perhaps one may very briefly sum them up by saying that for the novelist the question will be: Where am I to derive my standards of excellence from? For the critic: What standards of judgment have I? Unlike the Australians we have no established tradition of our own, which we may choose either to accept and develop, or else take as a point of departure. Hence the somewhat haphazard variety of our novels and criticism. And although variety may appear not such a bad thing from the reader's viewpoint, it will not be an advantage to the writer if it appears unrelated and merely confusing, because much of his energy will be drained away in a difficult preliminary endeavour to discover his necessary bearings.

So much for the problems of the situation. They are not, however, problems that remain exactly the same year after year, since there is always the possibility that a new novel will make one think rather differently about them. And this is certainly what happens when one reads Dan Davin's *Roads From Home*. Not that Mr. Davin has actually solved the problems; but neither is it true to say that they are evaded. Instead, one rather gets the impression that with the aid of his superabundant energy he has knocked them right and

left. Nevertheless the plain and encouraging fact of the matter is simply this: that something very like New Zealand is to be found in astonishing abundance inside the covers of his novel.

In the story the reader finds his attention mainly directed to the two grown-up sons of an Irish Catholic railwayman. They are John, who also works on the railway; and Ned, who is to satisfy his mother's pious wish by becoming a priest. John has already set out on his own road from home, and discovered it to be an almost impossibly difficult one; he has married a Protestant girl, only to discover afterwards that he is not the man she was hoping to marry. But luckily his mother isn't aware of this situation; for her it is quite bad enough that his marriage is a mixed one, and that the child that has been born has not yet been baptized. Ned's situation is even more difficult. Not only is he deciding not to be a priest, he is on the point of losing his faith as well. Eventually his mother will have to know, but he cannot in the meantime face up to the suffering that his decision will cause her; and yet he can avoid inflicting it only by carrying out the religious duties which his mother expects from him, but in which he is ceasing to believe.

These apparently insoluble predicaments of John and Ned are disclosed in the early chapters; or rather, one should say, they gradually emerge from a wealth of relevant detail, which the author presents with an unusual degree of literary skill, restraint and discretion—though without any sacrifice of his natural vigour so far as this reviewer can discern. Moreover, in addition to the railway background, the story depends for its development on such typical features of New Zealand life as a football match, an afternoon's rabbiting, and a race meeting. And the solutions, when they are finally arrived at, are satisfying enough if one remembers the strong Irish Catholic feeling for the family and its continuity. There is, indeed, only one matter about which the reader may feel some uncertainty. Mr. Davin has a brilliant gift for exposition, so it is hardly to be wondered at that he has used long expository passages in telling his story. There are occasions, however, when they seem to distract attention away from what is happening in the story, instead of concentrating attention on it—occasions when the reader tends to pause and think of the author as a gifted mind, rather than a gifted novelist.

Finally it must be said that, apart from everything else, there is a really remarkable feature about *Roads From Home* (continued on next page)



Spencer Digby photograph

DAN DAVIN

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