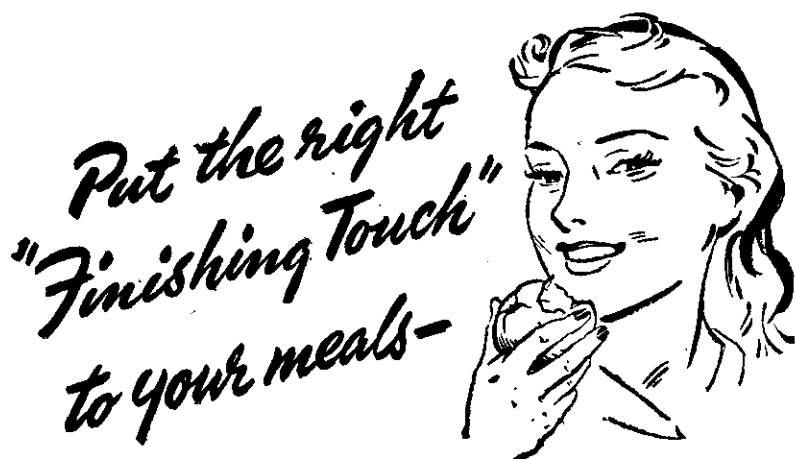




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REGIONAL CULTURE

(continued from previous page)

(publishing facilities and so on) are naturally more available in, say, London than in Wellington; and partly because a large community of artists and writers is formed, who live close together, go to the same parties, and conveniently exploit the gang principle when necessary. (There is also an aura of dignity and importance about everything that springs from the power-centre, or receives its approval.) I think it is little realised by the suburban intelligentsia just how much ganging-up there is among writers and artists, and their ancillaries, the publishers, reviewers, dealers and critics, in such places as London, Paris and New York; and to what extent these goings-on help to determine the patterns of fashionable culture. Art and letters imply a business, a means of livelihood, a career. No London coterie is going to "take up" Scottish poets, or Australian novelists, or New Zealand painters, except when such a policy will serve its own purposes. And that, of course, can happen.

The connection between art and literature and economic power, like the other "facts of life," is not discussed in polite society. But it is neither accidental nor unimportant. And, if it comes to the point, there is nothing particularly sinister about it. The domination of London is something that is more or less natural and inevitable, in the circumstances. There is no use our beating our breasts about it. The important thing is for us to objectify it in our minds, and get things straightened out.

IN times of decadence (such as the present), when there is something like a state of cultural bankruptcy, we find the impresarios of culture abandoning the discredited tribal magic, and pursuing the exotic in its various forms. Continental fashions, primitivism, Oriental influences, "proletarian" and dialect writing, political nonconformism and other such things are "taken up" in desperation. Now the value of all such things is largely dependent on the relationship they maintain with their time and place of origin—whether it be China, the bottom of a coal-mine, or a Scottish rural district. When a cosmopolitan clique adopts them, it merely assumes a virtue: it appears to be "getting back to reality," and so forth. Actually, all it is doing is to spread dilettantism, and make it appear to have substance. This sort of thing has been a major industry in Bloomsbury for 25 years.

Bankrupt or solvent, the intellectuals continue to dictate to the provinces and colonies so long as the power-centre in which they work maintains its political and economic grip. Cultural erosion may be taking place, decadence may be spreading like mould through a case of fruit, but authority, in matters relating to art and letters, still resides at the

centre, an epiphyte clinging to the old oak tree. The path to success and reputation, for a Scottish, New Zealand or Australian writer or painter, still lies through the doorway of the London publishing house or gallery. Just as the intransigent Mahrattas of the 18th Century gave place to the cricket-playing Etonian rajahs of more recent times, so we find the late C. F. Goldie's Maori portraits being "taken up" in London—partly because they conform to the standards of one of the powerful cliques, and partly because their "quaintness" and exotic interest help to relieve the boredom. And, in a different context, we find grimy pit-novelists from Wales being "taken up" by the arum-lilies of Bloomsbury.

Ian Finlay would no doubt apply the same judgment to Barrie and others of his countrymen who have gone to London and exploited canny Scottishness. The process works at all levels. The only instance in which it has not im-



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plied domination, I think, is in the case of the Irish—an unco-operative lot, whose destiny it is to provide the exception to every rule.

I am not suggesting, of course, that cross-fertilisation is a bad thing in the arts. External strains enrich and give strength. But a stud is one thing, and a zoo is another. In spite of Finlay's eloquence, and his optimism, then, the prospects for the growth or restoration of regional culture, in Scotland or in New Zealand, seem to me at the moment to be dim. But the situation is so confused, and we have so little notion of what changes are ahead of us, that it would be foolish to take anything for granted. *Ars longa, vita brevis.* (Or you can take it the other way round and get even more consolation from it, perhaps.)

THE four essays in *Since 1939* do little to relieve my suspicion that Britain is passing through a period of interesting, and quite charming, decadence. Robin Ironside provides a satisfactory survey of English painting during that period. There is no denying the attractiveness, and sometimes the imaginative force, of the artists he illustrates. How necessary was the reaction away from both the academic and the abstract! And how refreshing are these works, after one has been looking at some of the 19th Century relics that make morgues of our public galleries!

(continued on next page)