

"The Fire on the Snow"

TAKING the story of the disastrous ending to the British Antarctic Expedition of 1910-13 as his subject, Douglas Stewart, a New Zealand author now living in Australia, wrote a verse-play for radio a few years ago, and called it *The Fire on the Snow*. It was performed at least twice by Australian Broadcasting Commission players, and now it has been produced and recorded in the Production Studios of the NZBS for broadcasting over the four YA stations during the first week in August.

New Zealand had a strong link with Captain Robert Falcon Scott and his men, for the expedition's ship, *Terra Nova*, loaded her stores at Lyttelton and made Port Chalmers her last port of call before entering the ice, and Christchurch has, on a bank of the Avon River, the Scott statue which members of other polar expeditions never fail to visit. It was in November, 1911, that Scott and his four companions began their southern sledge journey. Though delayed by atrocious weather, they reached the Pole on January 18, 1912, only to find that they had been forestalled by the Norwegian, Amundsen.

With Captain Scott on the final dash were Dr. E. A. Wilson (Chief of the Scientific Staff of the expedition), Captain L. E. G. Oates (who was in charge of the Siberian ponies), Lieutenant H. R. Bowers (Commissariat Officer) and Petty Officer E. Evans (in charge of the sledging equipment), and these are the characters in *The Fire on the Snow* which traverses the period of greatest hardship from January 17, 1912, when the last supporting party returned to base, to March 29, 1912, when Scott's diary ceases.

After living on the ice for five months, marching 800 miles to the Pole, and almost 600 miles of the return journey, the party first lost Evans, then Oates, then Bowers, till finally Scott and Wilson were left, to die in their tent. Only 11 miles away was their One-Ton Camp, with the food and fuel that might have saved them had they been able to withstand the blizzard that raged for four days.

The play, which occupies 66 minutes, opens at the point where Scott, Wilson, Bowers, Evans and Oates are about to leave the last supporting party and go on to their goal. It is in free verse—often turning into prose—and the author makes much use of symbolic expression. The deadly monotony of polar conditions and the effects of deep and perpetual cold emerge through every speech; and here and there are moments

of colloquialism used aptly to ease the tenseness of the drama and preserve naturalness. The background music has been well chosen and the sound effects, which in a play of this kind could be easily over-emphasised, are but faintly suggestive and therefore not wearisome.

The cast of characters is: Scott (Bernard Beeby, who is also producer), Wilson (Eric Webber), Oates (John Huson), Bowers (William Austin), and Evans (Selwyn Toogood). The dialogue is skillfully joined together by the narrator of the theme, Peggy Walker.

Douglas Stewart, who attended Victoria University College, Wellington, was with several newspapers before he

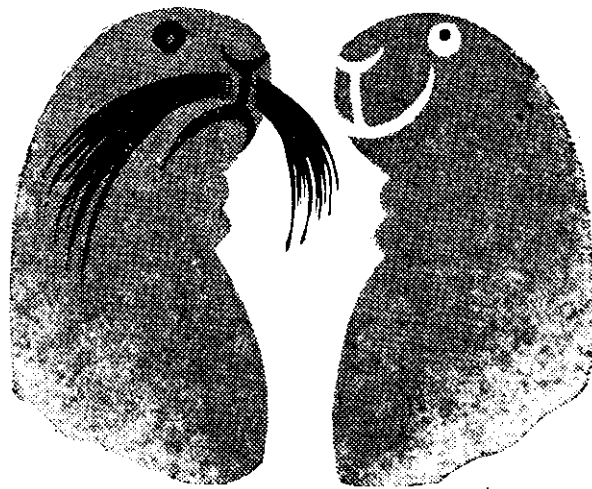


DOUGLAS STEWART, New Zealand author of the verse-drama "The Fire on the Snow."

worked his passage to England on a cargo boat. After gaining some experience in England he worked his way back again, to Australia this time, and settled down to a job on the staff of the *Sydney Bulletin*. He has published books of verse, including *Green Lions* (before he left New Zealand), *The White Cry*, *Elegy for an Airman* (illustrated by Norman Lindsay), and *Sonnets to an Unknown Soldier*. When *The Fire on the Snow* was first produced by the ABC, it created a small sensation. The *ABC Weekly* noted that it had provoked more correspondence than had any other ABC play or feature, and devoted an editorial article to "The Beauty of Words," with special reference to Stewart's language.

NZBS listeners will be able to judge *The Fire on the Snow* for themselves by tuning in to 3YA on Monday, August 1, at 9.30 p.m.; 4YA, on Wednesday, August 3, at 7.45 p.m.; 2YA on Friday, August 5, at 7.45 p.m.; or 1YA on Sunday, August 7, at 9.32 p.m.

N.Z. LISTENER, JULY 8, 1949.



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