Radio Review

FIRE IN THE WORD

WORDS in stage plays are decked out, enlarged and interpreted by movement, colour, setting and the presence of a visible audience. Words in radio plays have no such attendants. They must depend on themselves and on the voices which speak the lines. Words for radio must be more descriptive, more forceful and more sensitive if the message or picture they intend to convey is to be properly projected. Good verse, adequately spoken, would therefore seem to be the perfect form for broadcasting, and the argument is justified by the recent NZBS production of Douglas Stewart's *Fire on the Snow*. This verse play tells the story of Scott's last expedition, starting from where Scott, Wilson, Bowers, Oates and Evans leave the rest of the party for the fatal march to the Pole.

Bernard Beeby's production is restrained and suitable. The obvious is avoided and we have no banshee wailings of wind dragged in to tell us that a blizzard is blowing. No undue scuff-scuffing of sledge over snow. What the verse can tell is left for the verse to tell. The voices of the five men are well used, although Bowers, Wilson and Oates are at times difficult to distinguish; there is a certain similarity of accent and inflection.

The play unfolds partly through conversation and partly through the use of a commentator. This last is probably the star part, and Peggy Walker's reading was at all times sympathetic. It is probable that the author had a man's voice in mind when he wrote, but I am told that suitable men's voices are at a premium, and that it was thought better to use a good woman-voice rather than a second-rate man's.

It is in the commentary that Stewart's skill is best demonstrated. Here the lines are vigorous and picturesque. In the dialogue the effort to make the men speak naturally and colloquially has at times run counter to the poetic design of the whole. Phrases like "I've let you down," get in the way of the general flow and do not add to the play's stature. Colloquialism can be used in verse if the theme demands it, but when the conception is in the main larger than life little is gained by bringing the level down to the commonplace.

During the occasional break-up of nerves, the hysterical note was perhaps overdrawn. The accepted legend, brought out with no false heroics in Scott's diaries, is one of overall stoicism and fortitude. On the other hand, the author's understanding of men's minds is nowhere better brought out than in the passage spoken by the commentator after Oates's quiet farewell when he walks out into the storm and the men in the tent are left silent, knowing that though they might have kept him they had let him go.

The story itself is so well known, the end so inevitable, that we experience no excitement, no surprise. We know what we know. They move towards their familiar doom which is already written in snow and ice, already framed in blizzard, accented by crevasse. The play has not attained greatness, but it is good, authentic writing. The whole thing takes a little over an hour to run, and it says a lot for play and players that it did not seem too long.

My scrapbook says that in 1942 Stewart won a competition sponsored by the Australian Broadcasting Commission with another verse play called *The Golden Lover*. This is a comedy based on an ancient Maori legend. It would be interesting to hear this both for its own sake and as a contrast with the one just produced.

After so many run-of-the-mill presentations, *Fire on the Snow* stands out as an experiment well worth the trouble.

—Sycorax

Augustan Elegance

IS it merely the novelty of the instrument or is it the bite and crispness of its tone which makes harpsichord music so refreshing? I like to believe it is the latter. As I listened to a delightful recital from 1YA recently, when Layton Ring played Couperin and Scarlatti on the harpsichord and Constance Manning sang Purcell, part of the pleasure certainly came from my sense of the absolute rightness of the instrument for the music, and from the vision of the polish and grace of 18th Century culture which was conjured up by the plucking jacks. Couperin's "Dominos," with its baroque ornamentation, witty fancy and urbane gaiety, might have been a musical commentary on Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, and the delicate taste of the Scarlatti sonatas showed how Italy as well as France shared in the sophisticated elegance of the age. Not romanticized by the piano, but formal, brittle and metallic, the neat, almost impersonal, patterns of sound symbolized for me a time whose unity of spirit contrasts sharply with the disorder of an age which expressed itself later in the same evening through the doleful sentimentality of children's choirs, the inanity of "hit parades" and the synthetic nostalgia of "Music for Romance."

Looking at Education

IT was a sound idea to share the *Looking at Education* series among speakers representing different interests in the community, thus permitting criticism of recent changes as well as justification. The parent who spoke first gave on the whole a balanced survey, but her plea for extended art facilities struck me as being a somewhat false emphasis—until she explained that she herself had once taught art. I expected stronger criticism from the businessman, and it came—the familiar complaints of illiteracy and lack of the will to work. Calling Herbert Spencer to his aid, he suggested that one of the results of new educational trends has been to make young people seek remunerative, rather than spiritually

(continued on next page)