

FIRST THE EMBRYO — NOW THE INFANT

LETTERS AND ART IN NEW ZEALAND by E. H. McCormick. Centennial Surveys, No. 10. Published by the Department of Internal Affairs. Printed by Whitcombe and Tombs. Reviewed by Professor Ian A. Gordon.

THERE are two standard ways of criticising New Zealand literature: to go into ecstasies over Bracken and "The Greenstone Door," and to write off purple passages on the beauty of the bush and the integrity of the Maori or to proclaim (as so many New Zealanders do) that the stuff

is no good and turn to America and England to fill the shelves of our subscription libraries. Mr. McCormick has wisely done neither. He has written instead a sober, balanced narrative of New Zealand's production in letters and in pictorial art during her first hundred years, and written it with sanity and good judgment, without that hysteria and without that sense of inferiority which so often characterise the approach of the educated New Zealander to New Zealand affairs. To write a history

of the first hundred years of New Zealand letters and art is in a sense to write a history of nothing. The infancy of New Zealand literature comes not in 1840, but in 1940, and the infant shows sign of considerable promise. But the first century has been the embryonic stage and not the development from childhood to adolescence and manhood.

The book surveys the literary value of the journals of early visitors and settlers, and moves rapidly on to the "seminal years" represented by Edward Jerningham Wakefield's "Adventure in New Zealand" (1845), and Dieffenbach's "Travels in New Zealand" (1843), by the work of Grey, and of local poets of the calibre of James Barr, of Otago. Then follows an excellent piece of research work into the minor novel and minor verse of the years 1840-1890. Lady Barker, George Chanier, Pyke, Fargeon, C. C. Bowen, Mrs. Aylmer, Dugald Ferguson, Gorst, Domett—few read these now, and even their names are probably unfamiliar. Like Whitman in American literature, though far behind him, they have a significance, however, beyond their intrinsic importance. Literature they have little to offer. But in their pages lies raw material for future use, and in these rough, undigested pages of gold-mining and bush-felling and station life one can detect evolution of a New Zealand background and society that is only now finding integrated expression.

The work of the 'nineties — Edith S. Grossman, Reeves, Jessie Mackay, "The New Zealand Illustrated," with its encouragement of the new generation of historians and anthropologists is critically reviewed. The author seems to me unnecessarily tepid in his praise of Reeves, but he fully makes up for the coolness in his later note on "The Long White Cloud" in the bibliography. Now follows the most interesting section of the book, the final two chapters on New Zealand writing in the last 30 or 40 years.

It is inevitable that Katherine Mansfield should be given major consideration. Mr. McCormick has not yielded to the temptation of throwing his book out of equilibrium by devoting a large section to her work. Instead, he surveys her career briefly and without the "idolatry" of which he justly complains, reviews her exquisite though limited genius. Katherine Mansfield he regards as a symbol of the malaise he finds in other New Zealand novelists of her time and later, which resulted in their being completely at home neither in their native land of New Zealand nor in the England of their aspirations. Some trace of this is to be found in most of the novelists of the "pre-depression" years, Satchell, Jane Mander, Alice Webb, E. E. Baughan and the rest.

Mr. McCormick is lucky in his final chapter. Who writing a centennial history would not consider himself fortunate to find that some of the best things yet written in New Zealand had been published in 1940? Some of the most inter-



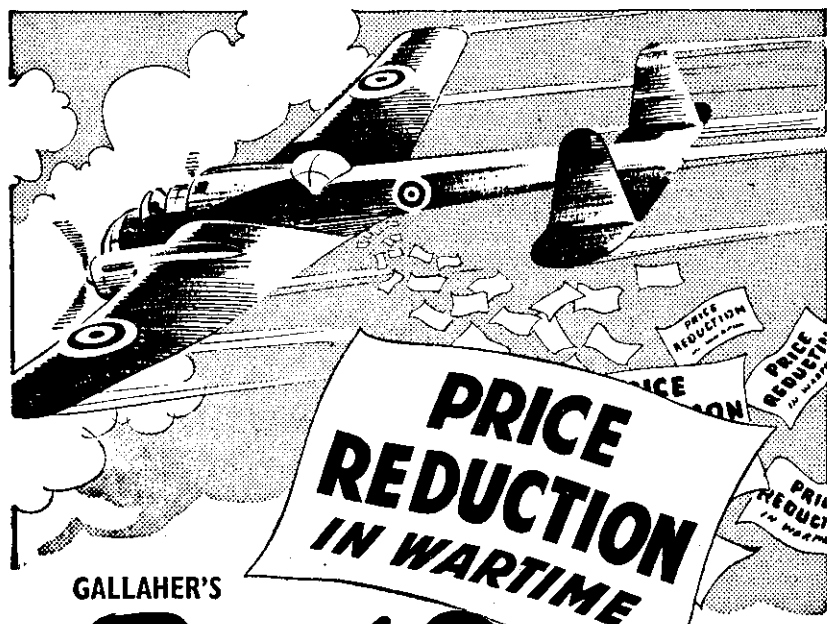
S. P. Andrew photograph
E. H. MCCORMICK
His are the right hands

esting poetry so far printed, came out under the stimulus of the Centennial Literary Competitions, and in John Mulgan's "Man Alone" and Frank Sargeson's "A Man and his Wife" have appeared the best New Zealand novel and the best group of New Zealand short stories that have yet seen print. The author does full justice to the real merits of these works. Both writers are on top of their material. They control their medium and know what they are doing. The sense of integration, so lacking in most New Zealand writing, is here at last present. Mulgan and Sargeson both write of New Zealand life without implicit apologies, and in a medium that incorporates the New Zealand idiom into English without spoiling the quality of the language itself. It is surprising that Mr. McCormick has not mentioned John Guthrie. "The Little Country" for all its melodrama and cardboard characterisation had a real sense of Taranaki small-town life, which is equally authentic. Other omissions in the contemporary period may be due to lack of space. But the personal essay, that hangover from nineteenth century romanticism, has too many practitioners to be completely ignored. And where room is found to record so much bad prose a line might have been spared for the precious but sensitive autobiographical works of P. W. Robertson.

But it is unfair to complain of such a workmanlike book. Mr. McCormick, throughout, shows a sense of scholarship and nice critical judgment—witness his notes on contemporary New Zealand poetry. He can appreciate the good qualities of the Caxton poets without being led astray by their tom-fooleries, and he shows good judgment on the work of Eileen Duggan—"not a beginning but a refined and beautiful close to a long chapter in the history of New Zealand writing."

Side by side with the history of New Zealand letters runs a commentary on New Zealand art in the first century. The only obvious omission is Lindauer. If Dieffenbach (who was, after all, but a two-year transient in this country), is worth two pages, surely these photographically brilliant Maori chiefs in the Auckland Old Settlers' Museum are worth a mention. But again, in his

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