

BOOKS

NEW ZEALAND POET WITH SOMETHING TO SAY

ANTI ALL THAT by Anton Vogt.
Published by the Caxton Press,
Christchurch. Price, 2/6.

A PART from a large number of amateur versifiers who enthuse about the same old bush scenes year after year, there are a few poets in New Zealand (not all of them vocal at the moment) who really have something to say. R. A. K. Mason (who is more celebrated beyond New Zealand than he is here), A. R. D. Fairburn, Allen Curnow and Dennis Glover are four.

To them I would now add the name of Anton Vogt, a young New Zealander who has just had a collection of verse by the title of "Anti All That" published by the Caxton Press of Christchurch. Not all of "Anti All That" was worth saying, but most of it was, and what is more, it has been said with forthrightness and originality and maturity of thought.

His occasional complexity may frighten readers of poetry in this country who like their poets to sing softly and simply. In this connection, although it is a trifle irreverent to draw any analogy, it is interesting to recall the criticism which greeted "The Waste Land."

When "The Waste Land" was published in the early 1920's, no less a critic than Sir John Squire, reviewing it in "The London Mercury" said, "Conceivably what is attempted here . . . is a faithful transcript of the poet's wandering thoughts when in a state of erudite depression. A grunt would serve equally well." And three years later, in 1926, Sir John observed testily of Eliot, "The kindest thing one can suppose is that he is experimenting with automatic writing. Why on earth he bothers to write at all, it is difficult to conceive."

I mention the incident because some of Anton Vogt's verse may be dismissed at first reading as "modern" and "difficult." Like all the symbolists, who are concerned with intimating things rather than stating them plainly, he cuts his corners, but nevertheless it is usually worth while trying to keep up with him.

The mood of the 1920's was dominated, uniquely, by the Eliot of "The Waste Land" and "The Hollow Men," but early in the '30's, the hollow men whispering together in meaningless, dry voices were transformed into a generation of vigorous, ringing cadences. A group of young men had been reading Marx, and had become "socially conscious" — Auden, Spender, MacNeice, Day Lewis, to mention just four of them. They had all of Eliot's disgust at the ugliness and emptiness of the modern world, but they refused to accept it, and sang challengingly of a better future. (Meanwhile warning their generation, as Auden did:

*The sky is darkening like a stain
Something is going to fall like rain,
and it won't be flowers.)*

But it is sufficient to point out the distinction between the two attitudes, and to remark that Anton Vogt has been influenced by both of them almost simultaneously. For instance, in a poem which is hinged on a quotation from Auden's "Ascent of F6," he observes bitterly, as Eliot might have observed: *Even the perennially successful are merely witness to their own corruption;*

*for the wine has soured, and there is nothing left
of leaves or fishes but the retributive skeleton.*

What does Anton Vogt believe in? It is worth asking the question, for he belongs to a generation of queuing, sceptical young intellectuals about whom there has always been a certain "to do."

Well, at the beginning of "Anti All That" he sets out with a definite aspiration.

*I will make a break with this inaction,
and peer with hungry eyes into dark places.*

He certainly does peer, and he laughs at a lot of things and debunks a lot of beliefs and points with enthusiastic

scorn at a lot of foolishness. And finally, at the very end, he arrives at the conclusion, understandable perhaps in a sensitive young man in a country which is a small faraway cog in the war machine:

*The decisions, in short, are made elsewhere;
and we are absent from our funerals
because our deaths no longer are
our own affair.*

It seems, almost, that the only thing he believes in is his unbelief. Mrs. A. in "The Ascent of F6" cried, "Give us something to be thankful for . . ." Now a perplexed generation of young men is crying, more directly, "Give us something to believe in." Disillusionment is not enough. But Anton Vogt hasn't even a Marxist's faith.

There are two or three things in "Anti All That" which I would have liked left out, but much of it is good, strong, individualistic stuff. His "Two War Poems" and the opening lines of "Fame" for instance:

*This man was so famous
that every time he opened his mouth
every newspaper in the province
quoted him;
but it is also indisputably true
that even in his own city there were
countless thousands
who never read the newspapers at all
except to get the sporting news
and further prospects for the Summer Handicap.*

Some of his shorter verses are amusing and to the point.

*I place my faith in living things
In Huxley's Communist ants,
Whose nakedness is unconcealed
By philosophic underpants.*

One thing I am thankful for—there is only one dose of New Zealand atmosphere in the whole collection. It is a healthy sign; yet another New Zealand poet is refusing to write for New Zealand alone.

I hope that Anton Vogt will discipline himself, learn that things can often be said just as effectively in short, simple Anglo-Saxon words of one and two syllables, and keep on writing.

—J.G.M.

NEW ZEALAND SONG

"My Home Beneath the Southern Cross" is the title of a song by E. A. Dennis. To his own adaptation of the familiar sacred tune "Duke Street," Mr. Dennis (who hails from Hororata, Canterbury) has welded four stanzas in praise of his homeland, New Zealand. The sentiment of the verse is definitely religious, and the popularity of the famous tune employed renders the song easily singable, and within the range of children and popular audiences. Whitcombe and Tombs publish the song.

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