

NEW ZEALAND CULTURE

M. H. Holcroft's Centennial Essay

THE DEEPENING STREAM. By M. H. Holcroft. Caxton Press, Christchurch.

TWO or three months ago it was announced in the newspapers that the Centennial Essay prize had gone to M. H. Holcroft, of Invercargill, for an entry called "The Deepening Stream." That, for most of us, was the beginning and the end of the story, since we thought no more about it. But Mr. Holcroft himself thought about it when the Caxton Press began to show an interest, and now the essay is available to everybody who has seven shillings and a taste for good books. And it is a remarkable essay, as the judges announced, but few believed when the prize was awarded.

It is remarkable because it is wise; because it is eloquent without being affected; because it is searching and deeply provocative. It is generally believed that no man by taking pains can add a cubit to his stature; but those who remember Mr. Holcroft as the author some years ago of indifferent novels and now meet him again will feel that if he has not added to his stature he has discovered and revealed it. To be an artist in New Zealand is almost if not quite impossible. It usually leads to foolish experiments and feeble mis-carriages of talent, as it did in this case. But it did not end there. Mr. Holcroft was tough enough to live for years on a pound or two a week—he confesses it quite frankly—but he was also big enough not to be embittered, and wise enough not to lose sight of the purpose of his struggle. Now he has arrived—not at wealth, of course, or any kind of literary security, but at achievement. *The Deepening Stream* is work to which any man of letters could put his name. It has both philosophy and craftsmanship, both substance and form, is inspired by our own country, and is the expression of our own deepest problems.

It would of course be an insult to the author to pretend that it is beyond criticism. It is far too important for that. The most casual reader will detect the difference between Mr. Holcroft at his best and Mr. Holcroft at his worst—will wonder why the pen that gave us the first eighteen lines, say, of Chapter 5, gave us the last seven lines of the third paragraph in that chapter. Others will wonder whether there is any difference between "faintly sinister undertones" from an ancient burial ground and ordinary superstition; whether Mr. Holcroft is not thinking with his nerves instead of with his head when he takes us on his "primeval journey from the caves to safe pastures"; and whether humour would not have modified some other strange passages. He is certainly serious, at times almost ludicrously solemn. But most of us would risk solemnity to write like this:

If you stand alone in a trackless glen, hearing no sound save the wood pigeons high up on the limestone bluffs, or a tui picking out his notes from an unseen

branch, the twilight seems to creep almost audibly among the thickets, and the forest reveals itself as something that is not ours, something that has never belonged even to the Maori, but has known centuries of an undisturbed stillness, or has contained some dream

of life too strange for our minds to grasp. Perhaps it is merely an emptiness that reveals itself in the silence of the forest. But even that is something to be feared. For the forests of older countries are peopled with the memories of remoter times, made warm with human occu-

pancy, saturated with an effluence of history; and although the scenes of past violence may have left their residue of fear—thickening the shadows of Western-main—it is a fear that can be traced back or given its vague association of ideas. But in New Zealand the empty places lead us straight towards the unknown; the sharp edge of silence has a primary significance, and thought grows dim—as if the collective mind has its margins here, and is replaced by the deeper unconsciousness of inorganic nature.

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