

DE PROFUNDIS

"THIS DARK WILL LIGHTEN."
Selected poems by R. A. K. Mason.
Published by the Caxton Press,
Christchurch.

FOR some reason I, and I believe others, had been expecting a collection of R. A. K. Mason's verse rather than the selection that *This Dark Will Lighten* is. While his collected poems would be well worth while, it is impossible not to commend the rigid selection, with its implication of keen self-criticism, which has culled from the work of nearly 20 years just 37 poems. It is an object lesson to writers who imagine that quantity of material is in itself sufficient justification for publishing.

There is no doubt that this small book is an event, and even if it is a day or two late for Christmas presents, I am going to urge everyone with the least appreciation or care for verse to buy it. I don't think I will seem too importunate and enthusiastic if I claim that here is some of the best verse that the literature of this young country has produced.

Probably because he has been published mostly in limited editions and in occasional anthologies, Mason is not as well known and appreciated here as he should be. He is, above all, mature and well-equipped and sure—sure of himself (or rather of the bitter certainty of his conflicts) and of his medium. Another important approach to him, I think, is the fact that there is no need to refer half apologetically to his New Zealand derivation. His work is New Zealand, but it does not belong exclusively here as does the work of half a dozen other writers one could mention.

There is little beyond an occasional phrase ("the lone hand digging gum") and a word or two ("bushie," "out-back," "deadbeat") to relate him to this country, and yet obviously he knows and feels and experiences the lot of the hungry and tired and poor, whether in the depressed alleys of cities or in the starved back country. He is a satisfactory reply to the attitude of mind which demands at the same time a universality of approach and "atmosphere" sufficiently distinctive to brand a work as "national."

Here, then, are 37 poems, some of which belong to the New Zealand scene, and all of which have been wrung out of a man's passions and bitternesses and struggles. They are, finally, his acceptance of the elemental facts of birth, pain, and death (facts which seem, strangely enough, to have escaped the attention of many New Zealand writers too pre-occupied with dreams and scenery). They are the fruit of a tree which has been beaten and buffeted by the weather:

Here are the children
of the best part of a lifetime.
Not as they should have grown,
but twisted, stunted, maimed
by poverty, chastity
and obedience.

Except in one poem, the wry, sardonic "Body of John," there is little humour in Mason, and certainly little glib optimism:

For my bitter verses are
sponges steeped in vinegar,
useless to the happy-eyed
but handy for the crucified.

From a technical point of view Mason is notable for his handling of the difficult sonnet form—"Footnote to John xi, 4," is a fine example—and for the economy and sureness he shows in shorter measures such as in "Christ on the Swag," "Prelude" and "Judas Iscariot." "Footnote to John xi, 4," which is not only Christ and his mother, but any son and any mother, is worth giving in full:

Don't throw your arms around me in
that way:

I know that what you tell me is the
truth—

yes, I suppose I loved you in my youth
as boys do love their mothers, so they
say,

but all that's gone from me this many
a day:

I am a merciless cactus, an uncouth
wild goat, a jagged old spear, the grim
tooth

of a lone crag. . . . Woman, I cannot
stay.

Each one of us must do his work of doom
and I shall do it even in despite

of her who brought me in pain from
her womb,

whose blood made me, who used to
bring the light

and sit on the bed up in my little
room

and tell me stories and tuck me up at
night.

On The Swag

His body doubled
under the pack
that sprawls untidily
on his old back,
the cold, wet deadbeat
plods up the track.

The cook peers out:
"Oh, curse, that old lag
here again
with his clumsy swag
made of a dirty old
turnip-bag."

"Bring him in, cook,
from the grey, level sleet,
put silk on his body,
slippers on his feet;
give him fire
and bread and meat.

Let the fruit be plucked
and the cake be iced,
the bed be snug
and the wine be spiced
in the old cove's nightcap:
for this is Christ."

—R. A. K. Mason.

(From "This Dark Will Lighten")

Lest Mason should be thought to be nothing but "bitter vinegar," one must remember his title, which points (I imagine) to a political dawn, the "Prelude," which points to the same dawn . . . For the day is almost here—

look, see scarlet in the sky of the
east,
the splash of blood that means dawn—
when the idols will be thrown down
and children will dance through our
land.

—and the love poem "Flow at Full
Moon," with its magnificent final verse:
And as the flow settles down to the sea
it nets me about
with a noose of one soft arm stretched
out from its course:

oh, loved one, my dreams turn from
from sleep: I shall rise and go out
and float my body into the flow and
press back till I find its source.

Two irrelevant points interested me. One was the comparison which "After Death" invites with Thomas Hardy's "Afterwards"—Mason's "but not for me" is an unfortunate line, and, all things considered, I prefer the warmer sentiment of Hardy—and the other was an image in one of the "Sonnets out of the Oceans Base" which recalled T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* epitaph for Phlebas the Phoenician, whose bones were picked in whispers by a current under sea. Mason's "Ocean Sonnets" were apparently written about 20 years ago, at almost the same time as *The Waste Land* was enraging J. C. Squire.

—IBID.

POEMS BY DOUGLAS STEWART

ELEGY FOR AN AIRMAN, by
Douglas Stewart. Published by Frank
C. Johnson, Sydney.

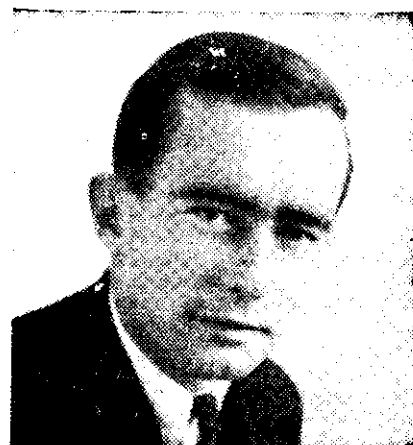
DOUGLAS STEWART, the young New Zealand newspaperman and poet now on the staff of *The Bulletin*, Sydney, has recently published two volumes of verse, most of which can be described, roughly and inadequately, as war poems. *Elegy For An Airman*, which has decorations by Norman Lindsay, has been published some time now, and shows that Stewart is generally carrying on the promise he showed in his early verse.

Elegy For An Airman is dedicated to the memory of a young Pilot-Officer in the Royal Air Force, and is largely an emotional recollection of boyhood experiences and friendship in Taranaki.

Most of the other poems in the small volume are rather orthodox and straightforward in thought and form, with a suggestion every now and then, however, of a revolt against everyday ugliness, which is a welcome relief from undiluted lyricism. Thus in "Furnished Room":

What use to stare in the mirror,
Beat on the story walls,
When even the face of terror
Is stale, is stolen from you,
When every ill that falls

Between the dark and the day
Has whitened other knuckles?
Let the next tenant say
When the party's broken up
And the white water chuckles,



DOUGLAS STEWART
Not with a bang but a whimper

My midnight sun of knowing
Dried up all waves and words,
And all I left on going
Was seaweed, snakeskin, thistle,
And the thought of the red birds

That is certainly a world ending not with a bang, but a whimper. As Constant Lambert has pointed out whimpering has now become one of the higher pleasures.

To the Editor

Sir,—Why does New Zealand cast out many of its best artists, and forget them—or if it doesn't cast them out, they go, anyway. I'm thinking in particular of Douglas Stewart, now in Australia, and located at Sydney in the *Bulletin* office. Stewart threatens to be one of the greatest poets produced in the south—soon he will be known as the great Australian poet.

How many New Zealanders are acquainted with his work? I would recommend that everyone read his two latest books of verses, *Elegy to An Airman* and *Sonnets to the Unknown Soldier*. These two volumes—and particularly the sonnets—contain some of the finest verse written during this war anywhere.

I would suggest that some of the sonnets might be published in *The Listener*—this would require little space. Your paper is acquiring a literary reputation, and we hope that it will develop this side, until it fills the want that exists here for a good literary weekly. J. C. WALSH (Nelson).

(We would, of course, not print the sonnets without the author's permission, even if they were available to us. But we print above a note on the only volume of Stewart's verse to which we at present have access).

Jessie Mackay Poetry Award

THE New Zealand Centre of the P.E.N. announces that entries for the second award of the Jessie Mackay Memorial Prize for Poetry close with the Secretary, Box 965, Wellington, on January 10 next. Professor Ian Gordon, Professor of English at Victoria College, Wellington, and C. A. Marris, editor of *New Zealand Best Poems*, will be the judges.

The first contest, results of which were announced recently, attracted several hundred entries.