

# "THE FIRE ON THE SNOW"

New Zealander's Radio Drama About Scott's Expedition

A YOUNG New Zealand writer, Douglas Stewart, son of a solicitor at Eltham, and now in Australia, has written a radio play *The Fire on the Snow*, which has been hailed by one critic as "the finest written radio play yet to come out of Australia, and among the finest written anywhere." *The Fire on the Snow* was performed twice by the ABC with some of the best known radio players in Australia, including Frank Harvey, Lou Vernon, Peter Bathurst, Peter Finch, John Alden, and Ida Osborne in the cast. It has been bought by the National Broadcasting Service, and it is hoped to produce it over the air in New Zealand some time in the near future.

The play tells in verse the story of Captain Scott's expedition to the South Pole, of the hardships endured in reaching it, to find that Amundsen and his party of Norwegians had been there first, and of the tragic return from the Pole, losing first Evans, then Oates, then Bowers, until finally Scott and Wilson were left to die together in their tent.

Douglas Stewart went from high school to Victoria University College, Wellington, and was with several New Zealand newspapers before he worked his passage to England on a cargo boat. After gaining some experience in England he worked his way back again, to Australia this time, and settled down to a job on the literary staff of the *Sydney Bulletin*. He has published books of verse, *Green Lions* (before he left New Zealand), *The White Cry* (published by Dents), *Elegy for an Airman* (which was illustrated by Norman Lindsay), and *Sonnets to an Unknown Soldier*, in Australia.

## Two Kinds of Language

*The Fire on the Snow* admittedly owes something to Archibald MacLeish,

whose poetic drama *The Fall of the City* demonstrated conclusively that fine language and colloquial dialogue can be wedded in a radio play with striking results. The debt to MacLeish, however, is in inspiration only; the play itself is completely individual.

The verse is modern, and Stewart has not been afraid to resort to symbolic expression. As Leslie Rees pointed out in *The ABC Weekly*, "it is verse meant for speaking, and ranges from the sculptured exactitude of the Narrator's linking lyrics to the easy-going colloquialism of the men in their less intense moments."

The theme of the play is set out simply by the Narrator:

*But the reply comes; the world is spun*

*Between two giant hands of ice  
And on any peak of living won  
From hardest hours, the blizzards hiss,*

*And the reward set for the blindest faith*

*In the fixed needle directing us  
Is to reach the Pole; and the Pole is death.*

"Against this beautiful coalescence of form and meaning, meaning pouring out with apparent spontaneity as though unaware of the sheer discipline imposed by metre and the half-rhyme or assonance commonly used by Stewart in this play—against that distillation of thought and word," says Leslie Rees, "comes an almost slangy everyday speech tactfully used to relieve the modern ear and aid naturalism:

*WILSON: Seriously though,  
I saw last winter how the climate changed us.*

*We hardly spoke once that long silver twilight*

*Had really begun to permeate our bodies.*

*EVANS: You mean to say we're balmy?*

*OATES: Of course you are.*

*And so am I, hauling a sledge to the Pole*

*When I might be home where there's food and fires and women.*

"But it is a colloquialism supple to a moment's change of mood, and can purify and elevate itself as it will. There is Scott's passing nostalgia:

*I like to think of the lights of Piccadilly*

*And of how in the smoky park among the oaks*

*All London suddenly breaks on you like thunder.*

It was not necessary to clothe the story of the expedition with drama as cold bare bones with a cloak. The simple facts carry at times an almost too heavy burden of drama and the sense of fate. The scene where Oates goes out into the snow to die is told simply:

*Nobody move, don't move,*

*I am just going outside, I may be some time.*

To have embroidered on the stark simplicity of Scott's diary would have been fatal.

## Brilliant Contrast

Again to quote Leslie Rees: "The blinding monotony, the stiff cold touch of perpetual ice and snow are in every speech. You feel how the cold numbed the marrow of Scott's men. Cold until



DOUGLAS STEWART  
Created a small sensation

they are like walking stalagmites. Cold until they die of it. But that is not all. The contrasting warmth of flame is as continually evoked, in fact, is a counterpoint through the play. It is brilliantly done, this antithetical symbolism of ice and flame, the frozen rigour of the task and the fire of man's hardihood.

"So that the text leaps and flashes with colour and sense—feeling, freezing and blazing:

*Agony.*

*Two dead men; and a dying man remembering,*

*The burning snow, the crags towering like flame.*

The first ABC production of *The Fire on the Snow* created a small sensation. *The ABC Weekly* noted that it had provoked more correspondence than had any other play or feature, and devoted an editorial article to "The Beauty of Words," with special reference to Douglas Stewart's fine language. The play was repeated a second time over the ABC.

## The Men Who Fight For France

(Written for "The Listener" by "MIDEASTER")

THE other day in London's Albert Hall, the voice of General de Gaulle rang out again, this time with new hope after nearly eighteen months of battling for Free France: "From a handful of men we have become an unshakeable mass. We have restored the bond of unity to an imprisoned nation, with a will to resist, a will for vengeance and a will to regain her territory."

But what of this "unshakeable mass" of Frenchmen who fight on—what manner of men are they? What do they think of this tremendous responsibility thrust on them by the Old Men of Vichy and their disgusting horde of overlords? We have heard of their sweep through Syria, their defeat of the Axis on the road to Damascus. During the past few weeks I have had the chance of meeting many of these men — aviators, tank corps, cavalry, and plain infantry—down in Cairo for a variety of reasons, from convalescent leave to special missions.

A favourite meeting place for them is a certain small but comfortable cafe and pension in Heliopolis, Cairo's residential suburb. Here they are provided free of charge with beds, breakfasts, theatre tickets, and what means more even than these—endless discussions over glasses of vermouth and *vin ordinaire* in which the constantly reiterated theme is, "When we get back to France," "When I'm home once more in Lille" (or Nancy or Boulogne or Toulouse).

## In a Cafe

I went to this cafe the other evening with a young French sergeant in the tank corps, Jean L—, down in Cairo on a special mission with his commanding officer. On the sleeve of his tunic he wore two silver chevrons, inverted the opposite way to the New Zealand corporal's, signifying a year's service with the Free French. Over his left tunic pocket was a red and white medal ribbon, with a star in the centre—the Croix de Guerre with star. Despite the

fact that he had fought in the gallant rearguard fight on the Dunkirk perimeter defences, had been badly wounded there and in consequence had spent three months in St. Albans hospital in England before being able to join the de Gaulle forces, he confessed, "I am becoming bored—all of us are a little—in Syria: Damascus is a miserable hole and there is nothing to do there at night; what we want most is to be able to join in the great fight that is beginning in the desert." I asked about his family—yes, they were still in France. Unoccupied France. "Well, that's not so bad," I murmured in sympathy. "Isn't it?" he asked. His eyes were smiling but hard. They have no illusions about Vichy and the Darlan-Laval gang, these Free Frenchmen. They know that in the country they hope to save from herself—both occupied and unoccupied — there is the tyranny of complete totalitarianism everywhere now. Petain can expect no more concessions than the hated Boche when the banners of the Cross of Lorraine go forward on French soil.

## A Birthday

We had a merry time that night, in the dim-lit cafe in Heliopolis, presided over by a genial M. Arevian, an Armenian who served throughout 1914-18 with the

Foreign Legion. One of the Frenchmen, an aviator, was celebrating his twenty-first birthday. He had joined the forces when he was eighteen. His family, living near Lyons, were orchardists. When he escaped from Marseilles to join the Free French, his father tried to come too, but was stopped at the port. He had learnt since that his father was in prison. It was depressing to think that he should be celebrating his official entry into manhood out here while his family were, literally, under the heel of the enemy. I asked him what he wanted to do when the war was over. His eyes shone. For him no grandiose ambitions. "I shall go back to Lyons," he said, "and I shall grow flowers and fruit; I shall have a beautiful orchard. You would like Lyons, it is a gay town, especially in summer. But if you suffer from colds don't come in winter, for then mists rise from the Rhône and the Saône, our two rivers, and it is very damp and cold." But I could see that for him even the mists of winter were beautiful. He wanted to go back to the peace of flowers and fruit; but meanwhile, while this article is being written, he flies his plane on patrol across the sandy vastness of Syria, waiting and watching always for

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