

A PARDON FOR A POEM

Some Stories About Syracuse

PERHAPS we are getting a little blasé about the ancient places that are turning up in the track of the Empire's armies. New Zealand troops in the shadow of the Acropolis; New Zealand troops on the slopes of Mount Olympus and in the Pass of Thermopylae; Mr. Churchill addressing victorious soldiers in the ruins of the amphitheatre of Carthage—and so on. Now the British under Montgomery have taken Syracuse.

Columns could be written about a city that was once a queen in the Mediterranean, and has seen many more than 2000 years of battle, change of government, and flowering of cultures. For instance, if there is such a person as Macaulay's schoolboy, he knows that Archimedes lived and laboured there, and, so the story goes, when the besieging Romans broke in, was found by a soldier studying a geometrical problem drawn on the ground. Archimedes told the Roman to stand aside, and the Roman killed him.

Great Tragedy

The Athenian empire met its end in Syracuse. Athens was involved in a war in Greece, and sought to redress the balance by conquering the Greek colony of Syracuse. Athens sent out the greatest expedition, naval and military, that had ever left any Greek city. The brilliant Alcibiades was recalled from the command and Nicias was put in charge. Nicias had won victories, but he had advised against this enterprise, and perhaps that was the beginning of the trouble. What may have been worse, he was a sick man. At any rate, he fumbled the war at Syracuse, and when it was clear he should abandon the siege, was scared by an eclipse of the moon, and stayed on too long. The result was ruin; the expedition was destroyed. There wasn't much pity in those days. Though Greek was fighting Greek, the victors branded the captive Athenians on the forehead and made them work in the quarries. Syracusans used to amuse themselves by strolling out to jeer at the captives.

But the prisoners could get kind treatment and even freedom. Plutarch tells us that anyone who was able to repeat passages from the Athenian

dramatist Euripides was so treated. Greek colonies round the Mediterranean looked to the Motherland for their culture, and their citizens were as fond of the tragic drama as New Zealanders are of horse-racing. There was no printing. There were no newspapers, cinemas or radio. Browning tells the story of Balaustion, a Greek girl from Rhodes; I believe he got it from Plutarch. Balaustion, with other Greeks, was on her way to Athens after the defeat of the Athenians at Syracuse, when driven out of its course by storms and pursued by pirates, the ship sought refuge in Syracuse harbour. The Syracusans said they didn't want any more Athenians, and ordered the travellers away. The pirates waited outside. Then someone inquired if anyone on board knew any Euripides. Balaustion did; she knew the whole of the *Alcestis*. Excitement and delight among the Syracusans; a new Euripides! "In we row, bringing more Euripides!" The city thronged out to "the suburb temple," and Balaustion stood on the top step and "told the play." And

because Greeks are Greeks, and hearts are hearts

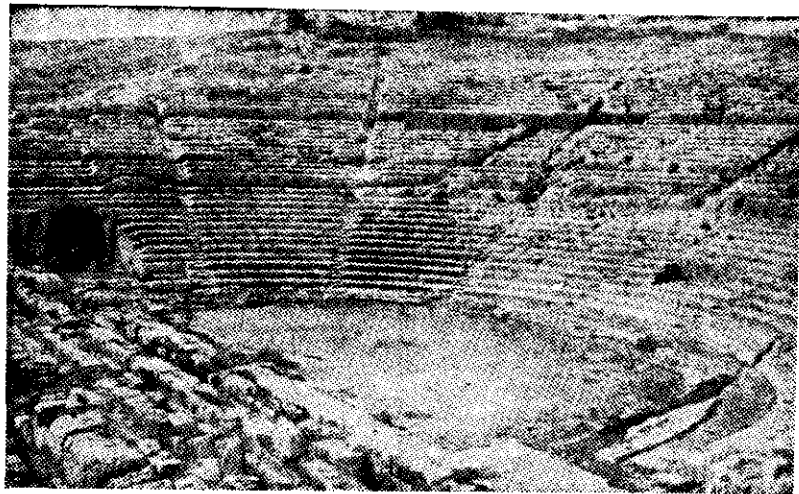
And poetry is power,

the Syracusans listened, and listened to another recital, and sent the band of Athenians on their way again "with good words and great wishes."

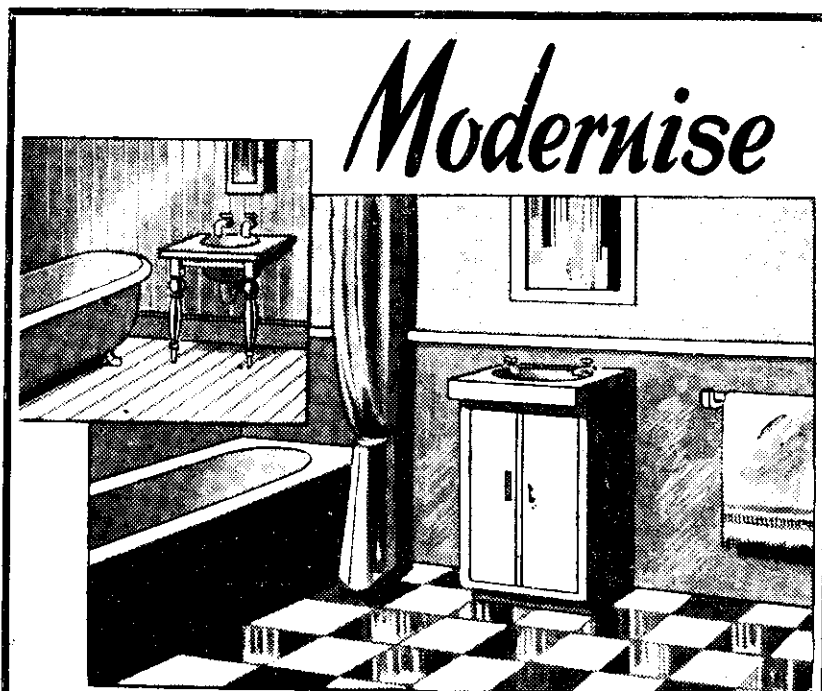
That engaging Australian essayist, Walter Murdoch, translates the story into modern terms. He imagines Melbourne agog because rumour has it that a certain steamer is arriving with several cases of new poetry in her cargo. Excited people flock to Port Melbourne, and there is tense silence among the crowd as the liner draws in. Suddenly, a man in the bows waves his arms and shouts, "In we come, bringing more T. S. Eliot!" There are cries of exultation in the crowd, and another man calls out, "And some Edith Sitwell, too!" and women faint and strong men weep.

I leave you to work out the translation in terms of New Zealand. But if Syracuse is peopled with ghosts, there is one I would like to meet above all others, and that's the Greek girl Balaustion.

—A.M.



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