

# NEW ZEALAND BOOKS IN LONDON

Sir,—In your issue of June 4 you published an account by Professor Ian A. Gordon of an exhibition of New Zealand books held in London recently. Copies of the catalogue of that exhibition have now reached New Zealand, and I shall be grateful if you will allow me space to comment on it.

The idea of the exhibition was an excellent one, and New Zealand readers, writers and publishers have reason to be grateful to those who organised it. But the catalogue betrays two regrettable weaknesses. The first concerns the books chosen for display. In a foreword to the catalogue, Professor Gordon states that the exhibition "is intended to represent the normal output of books written and published from year to year in the Dominion"; it was an exhibition, that is, of books published, and not of New Zealand literature. Yet in practice it is almost impossible to separate the two: such an exhibition would inevitably be taken in London to be representative of literature as well as of books, and, indeed, Professor Gordon seems to take it as being so in his foreword, in saying, for example, that the main line of development of New Zealand fiction "is represented here by more recent writers, John Mulgan, Frank Sargeson, Dan Davin and James Courage in particular. . ." In fact, the catalogue does not include any work by Frank Sar-

geson; and the omission of the country's most eminent living writer is so astonishing that one is at a loss to account for it. But others of our foremost writers of fiction today are not represented either: Roderick Finlayson, G. R. Gilbert, and David Ballantyne, though Mr. Ballantyne's novel was published in America, which might be a reason for not including it. Of other writers, it seems largely chance that some are present and others not—and Eileen Duggan, too, is mentioned in Professor Gordon's foreword, yet not included in the catalogue; but one omission which leaps to the eye is that of R. A. K. Mason; and I may have overlooked others. It seems inexplicable that no books by any of these writers were included.

Although the exhibition was being planned for as long as a year in advance, it is no doubt owing to insufficient preparation by people fully occupied with other work that the choice of books was not more careful. The same reason, we must suppose, accounts for the second weakness, namely, the errors, the incomplete entries, and the glaring inconsistencies of the catalogue, which seems to reveal a hand unfamiliar with New Zealand books. A catalogue which fails as often as this one does to state when, where and by whom a book was published defeats its own purpose, and does not do New Zealand much credit.

While we may be glad, then, that the exhibition was held, we must regret that it was not more thorough. If shortage of staff at New Zealand House in London was the reason for this, it is time that someone capable was appointed to attend to this side of New Zealand affairs there. It is no longer negligible; in terms of economics it is of increasing value; and it brings great prestige. It would be more valuable still if at the same time the old bookstall at the information desk at New Zealand House could be reorganised and become, in effect, a New Zealand bookshop in London. There has long been a need for one, because it has never been possible to buy New Zealand books in England; English bookshops do not stock them or even know that they exist. This exhibition has at last made their existence known, and now is the time to take advantage of the interest which it aroused. The country could have no better form of publicity than its books.

CHARLES BRASCH (Dunedin).

(This letter was shown to Professor Gordon, whose reply is printed below.—Ed.)

Sir.—Mr. Brasch's list of omissions and weaknesses in the first New Zealand book exhibition in London comes

as no surprise to those of us connected with the show—we could add to his list, if necessary. It turned out—as we discovered—a tricky business, when the organisers were (during the critical period of selection and collection) remotely separated in Wellington, New York and London, to keep track of the discrete activities of several departments, plus over a score of publishers and correspondents. When to this was added the apparently inevitable shipping delays, which produced the roughly-listed volumes in London a week before the opening, leaving a catalogue to be assembled in the weekend private time of an official whose normal duties lay far removed from books and publishing, it is not surprising that the show could provide plenty of scope for what the Americans call the Monday morning quarter-backs. Nevertheless, I can assure your correspondent that the general reaction was pleasure at what was achieved rather than regrets at weaknesses—particularly as many of the gaps mentioned were noticed and filled before the exhibition opened, but after the catalogue went to press.

Ideally we required a full-time (and therefore paid) organiser in Wellington, a skilled (and therefore paid) cataloguer, and a full-time (and therefore, etc., etc.), organiser in London. With these, the exhibition would have been fuller and better. Had we waited till they ap-

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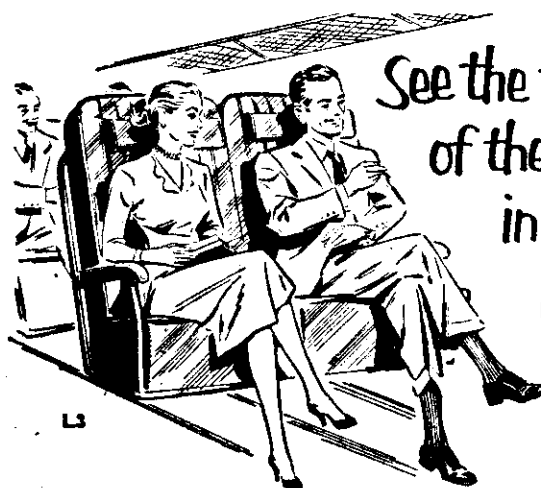
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