

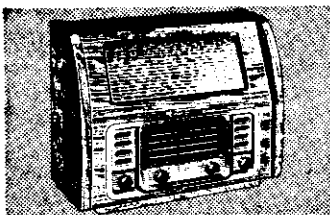
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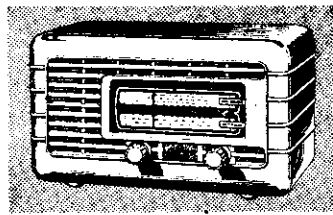
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BOOKS

The Evening of Our Days

THE BLESSINGS OF OLD AGE, an anthology compiled by Marjorie E. Maxwell; Faber and Faber, English price 12 6.

(Reviewed by Anton Vogt)

FOR the young, anthologies are introductions; for the old, distillations. For those in the middle way both tend to be unsatisfactory, unless they are of their own compiling. But *The Blessings of Old Age* is a mood anthology, made pleasing by good taste and exquisite arrangement. Poets, prophets, saints and philosophers, from St. Luke to Day Lewis, contribute several hundred quotations on youth and age and death. The predominant mood, as one might expect, is that of reconciliation; not despair. That this mood should prevail without the prop of sentimentality, and without inducing boredom, is proof of careful selection.

The Bible is the text most often quoted: "And that which thou sowest . . ." (Corinthians), "Except a corn of wheat . . ." (John), "One generation passeth away . . ." (Ecclesiastes), "Then shall the dust return to the earth . . ." (Ibid.) are representative of some 30 excerpts. But oddly enough, though the compiler is undoubtedly a practising Christian, the prevailing atmosphere is humanist. Life is loved for its own sake, also in age: "My heart's still light, albeit my locks be grey," as Allan Ramsay says. Or, as Auden writes with absolute honesty, "I am very glad I shall never be twenty and have to go through that business again. . ." Or even more emphatically, from Jan Struther:

You think yourselves the adventurous ones.
you young ones . . .
But I, who was young and now am old, can
tell you
There is no adventure like the adventure of
age.

You are lusty in love, but you never held
woman dearer
Than we hold life, our slim one, our slender
darling,
Our sweet, fleet, fickle and false tormentor,
Who stands always on tiptoe, poised to leave
us.
Bound to us only by the strength of our
will to keep her.

Far from glossing over the unpleasant, however, the compiler has given us a section she calls "Tares Among the Wheat." There is tough stuff here: John

Donne, William Blake, George Herbert, and Matthew Arnold's

Charge once more, then, and be dumb!
Let the victors, when they come,
When the forts of folly fall,
Find thy body by the wall.
The stoicism here, surely, is pagan.

In point of fact, the authors most suspect are the "heroic" Christians. Robert Browning was a good poet, but a bore as a philosopher. Robert Louis Stevenson was perhaps not a poet at all, and makes a glibly unconvincing counsellor. Both are over-represented, with verbal optimism that seems more like a disease than a blessing. If I add that Byron is represented once, and unfairly, I admit the inevitable; that, in spite of my praise, Miss Maxwell and I do not share all our prejudices. But then, who does?

An ex-colleague of mine was fond of saying that everyone over forty should be preparing himself for death. It isn't an original idea, but it is an important one. This book will please anyone who has ever entertained the thought. But its chief value will be for those (essentially childish) people who fear old age.

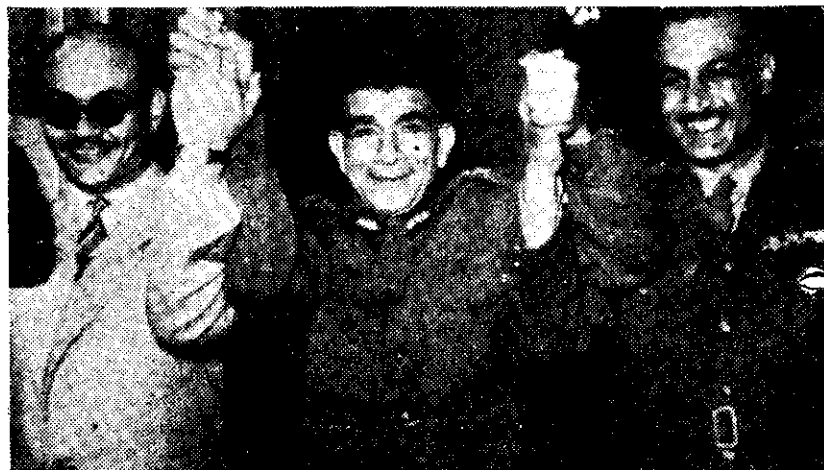
EGYPT TODAY

EGYPT AT MID-CENTURY, an Economic Survey by Charles Issawi; Oxford University Press, English price 21 ..

THE population of Egypt may number 20,000,000 people, but nobody is very sure of this, for the census returns are not sufficiently accurate—for example in the 1947 census, "it is probable that many inhabitants filled in their forms wrongly in the hope of getting extra ration cards." This type of form-filling and statistical uncertainty is characteristic of many countries, and particularly of those countries where a poor Government service is combined with near-feudalism.

In this case it is a country where poverty has been getting worse. Although the author says there are fewer blind people—there were 86,000 in 1937, against 75,000 in 1947—he also points out that the working capacity of the Egyptian labourer, measured by the volume of earth dug out per day, has fallen by 25 to 30 per cent since the First World War. The loss of vitality is directly due to poverty and disease;

(continued on next page)



"It is the middle class which should be trusted in Egypt"

N.Z. LISTENER, OCTOBER 1, 1954.