

# NEW DIRECTIONS?

NEW ZEALAND POETRY YEARBOOK,  
Volume Four, edited by Louis Johnson; the  
Pegasus Press, Christchurch, 10/6.

(Reviewed by James Bertram)

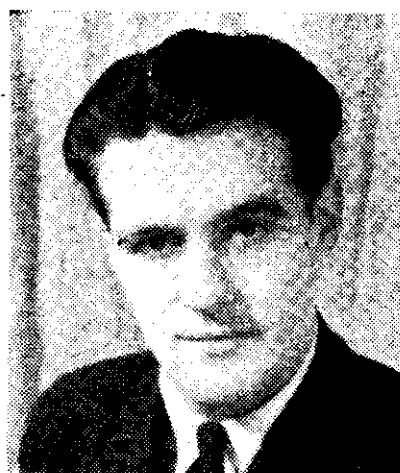
THIS collection of recent verse opens with expansive, forceful reporting on the Rimutaka Tunnel, and ends with the concentrated, lapidary bitterness of a New Zealand poetic testament. Between is work of thirty poets of three generations; the whole is preceded by some oracular remarks on poetry by the editor, and interspersed with answers to a loosely-worded but comprehensive questionnaire on the environment, theory and technique of verse-writing in this country. What is the harassed reviewer—who comes in for some hard comments in advance—to make of all this?

He may seek immunity in a few generalisations. Despite some lapses by printer and editor, this is probably the best half-guinea's worth to come from a New Zealand press in the last year. Poetry is still our most flourishing creative art: there is a wider range of thought and feeling here, at a higher

general level of accomplishment, than may, I think, be found in any other current mode of expression. Most of these poets know what they want to say, and succeed in saying it. They are not tired or lost, they are certainly not inhibited, they are not provincial unless they want to be. Mr. Johnson thinks this is the best of the annual collections he has made, a volume of "consolidation": he may well be right on both counts.

What of the level of achievement? Poetry has its absolutes, but these are set too high to be useful for contemporary assessment. How does the good work here compare with the best work, say, in Allen Curnow's anthology?

To begin with more familiar names: there is a full-dress virtuoso performance by Mr. Curnow himself, a moving personal lyric by J. R. Hervey; and a beautiful miniature by Charles Brasch which would be distinguished in any company. James Baxter is not shown at his very best, perhaps; but we have four of his different manners, and he writes wisdom in a poet's prose. M. K. Joseph writes hard critical sense, and a precise experimental poem. Some names (*pace* Mr. Johnson) are missed: did Denis



LOUIS JOHNSON  
A volume of consolidation

Glover really wish nothing he has written to stand in these pages? R. A. K. Mason appears, as it were, by deputy, in two of the strongest poems by younger contributors.

What of the "Wellington Group" of the late 'forties—has that impulse ceased? Alistair Campbell's "Aunt Lucrezia" is subtle and enigmatic in a deep Southern style; W. H. Oliver is now subtle and intricate in an Oxford manner; Hubert Witheford is for once unsubtle, and heaves a hand grenade.

Louis Johnson, the most self-consciously "urban" member of the group, mars his finest poem (for me) by an unfortunate final couplet: he has enough poetic energy to run a dynamo, but seems to neglect what Mr. Baxter considers a poet's main job. Of Pat Wilson's contributions the less said the better. A welcome infusion of new blood comes from Charles Doyle, who writes admirably self-possessed verse for so a national romantic. Anton Vogt is still resonantly rhetorical, and Arthur Barker's somewhat surprising raid upon actuality (is he a heretic here, for giving us a slice of recognisably New Zealand life?) re-establishes links across the years with Alan Mulgan and a perhaps neglected past.

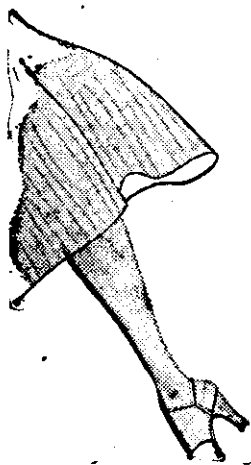
Who else may without violence be yoked together? Kendrick Smithyman, Robert Chapman, and Keith Sinclair (the "Auckland metaphysicals") are abrupt and explosive; they have associates in Robert Thompson, John Cody and C. K. Stead. Douglas Stewart and W. Hart-Smith are relatively extroverted and objective, and Colin Newbury follows them. I found the contributions by women writers—only three are represented—disappointing; among newer names, I liked particularly Robert Dyer's inverted odyssey, "The Dissatisfied"—though this, too, is a variation on a familiar theme.

Indeed, whatever the theory, the old themes are likely to recur. And if there

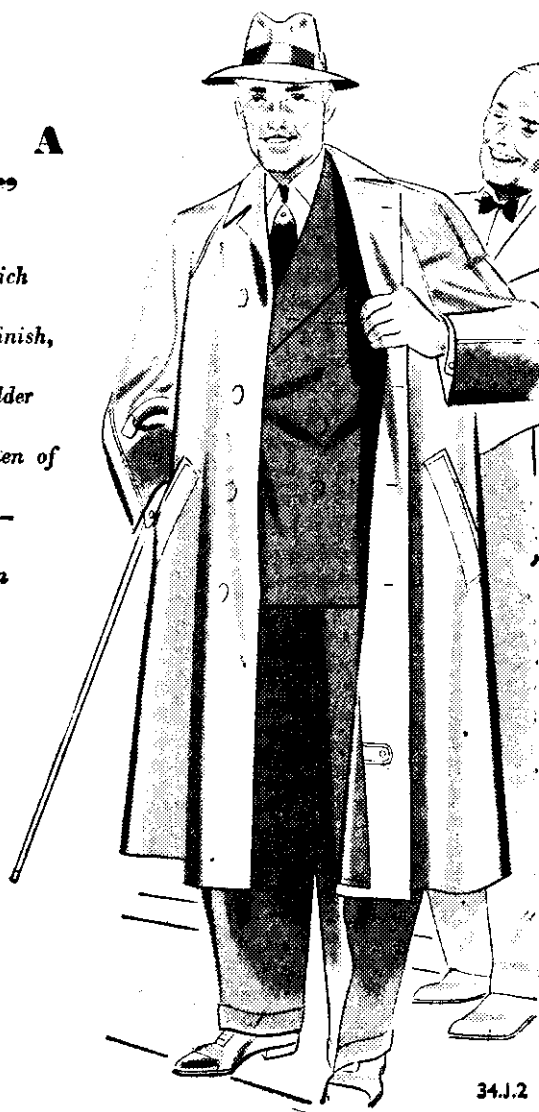
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