

THE HUBERT CHURCH PAPERS

LUCKY MAIDMENT is a dashing fellow with a moustache who has never turned his back on "the girls, the horses, the cards," and whose philosophy of life is "that luck is all." But Lucky gets himself into trouble, one way and another. He loses thousands of pounds in the "bottomless swamp" of a New Zealand newspaper called *The Tomtom*. And he is worried by memories of a past misdeed, when he ran away with Ursula Brandon and deserted her in San Francisco. It all comes back to him when he sees her daughter (and his) singing under an assumed name with a touring opera company in Wellington. "At fifty years on," Maidment thought, "can a gambler have used up his luck for ever? . . . Suppose adversity was coming? Long ago he had loved, and won, and betrayed . . ."

Maidment is the hero of an unpublished novel by Hubert Church, whose name is perpetuated in the annual award for distinction in prose writing in New Zealand. A typed version of the novel exists among four boxes of manuscript which were recently donated to the Turnbull Library in Wellington by the author's great-nephew Dr. R. Hugo Mackay, from Australia. They comprise one of the Turnbull's more important New Zealand acquisitions in recent years, and include the MSS of a number of unpublished poems, the novels *Lucky Maidment* and *Old Wairau*, eight short stories, about 40 essays, and other papers. This material represents the literary debris of a life in which letters played second role to the labour of public service with the Treasury Department in Wellington.

During his lifetime Church published four volumes of poetry and one novel. He was supremely a poet, especially for such pieces as "Victoria College," or "Bowen Falls." It may seem strange that his name is perpetuated in a prose award, and the circumstances behind this paradox have never been satisfactorily explained. But there seem to be two possible reasons for it. First, he may have wished to be remembered as a prose writer rather than a poet (he wrote much more in prose but was less successful in getting it published); secondly, since an award for poetry had already been established (the Jessie Mackay award) a prose award was the best remaining way of establishing a memorial to his name. The latter explanation seems to be the more reasonable, but a study of his unpublished essays, novels and short stories reveals that his talents as a prose writer were not inconsiderable. So the first cannot be entirely ruled out.

Hubert Church was born in Hobart on June 13, 1857. His father, Hubert Day Church, a barrister, came from Somerset, and the family was descended from that of John Hampden. Hubert Church, Jr. (his full name was Hubert Newman Wigmore Church), was educated in England from 1865 to 1872 at Guildford, Felstead, and Oxford University. An accident at cricket caused severe deafness and ended his English school life. He came to New Zealand in 1873, and in 1879 entered the Treasury Department of the Government. In the years between 1873 and 1879 he apparently lived for at least part of the time in Marlborough.

His first book of poems was *The West Wind*, which appeared in 1902 as No.

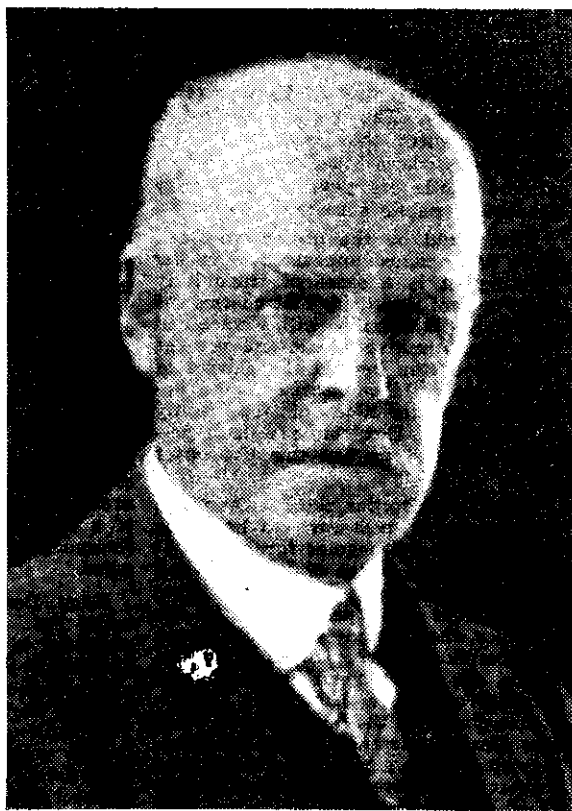
5 of "*The Bulletin Booklets*." A. G. Stephens said of this volume that "the charm of Hubert Church's verse is a charm of slow, unfolding sweetness, of suave and mellow grace." But Stephens also thought that "The refinement of his mind attenuates the force of his expression—the force of his emotion, it may be." *The West Wind* was followed by *Poems* (1904), which contains the sonnet "Victoria College," *Egmont* (1908), and *Poems* (1912). The last two contain poems from his earlier collections, so that the final volume is the product of a winnowing process over the years. In 1916 his novel *Tonks* came out in London. *Tonks* is the story of an English nobleman on tour through the North Island, where he has various amusing adventures as he encounters local customs. But it is not of the quality of his poems.

After Hubert Church's death on April 8, 1932, Jessie Mackay wrote a fine tribute to her fellow-poet in *The Press*, Christchurch. She echoed A. G. Stephens's opinion when she said that "the English classicism of his youth drew him increasingly back to the far-found and the archaic." She liked his poem "Bowen Falls"—"the clearest, loveliest song of beauty all our New Zealandian owns"—and she also liked among his verse "To the Light," "New Zealand," and "A Fugue." She thought he was a poet "meditative, detached, abstract . . . a singer halting between the concrete present and the timeless whirl of metaphysical questing." She said that "there must have been later poems than these, poems reflecting that considerable interlude between his retirement from the New Zealand Civil Service and his settling in East Malvern (Victoria)."

What are the contents of the four boxes of manuscript in the Turnbull Library? *Lucky Maidment* has already been mentioned. *Old Wairau* is a rustic, slow-moving novel about the small colonial society of Marlborough in the 1880's. The most elaborate of the stories is "A Dead Certainty," about a flash horse-racing cove named "Certainty" Rogers, who runs away to Sydney with the wife of his friend Bastable, then deserts her—a variant of the Lucky Maidment theme.

The others include "Johnson's Mix-ture," the romance of a tobacconist, "Return," a story of first love set in the Wairau Valley, "Moroney Quits," and "The Watcher"—the last being another tale of a man who runs off with his best friend's wife. The stories have an interesting period flavour of the 1890's, but are somewhat amateurish and crudely worked out.

The essays, however, are a different matter. There are 39 of them by a rough count. They appear to have been



Turnbull Library photograph

HUBERT CHURCH
Four boxes of manuscript

written after Church retired from the New Zealand public service and went to live in Australia. Most are written in traditional style and they reveal a genuine flair for the genre. Their titles vary from "Conscience Money" and "On Being a Tory," to "The Tempestuous Petticoat," "Tops Are In," and "The Kite." With their intensely "literary" style, the profuse quotations from authors as varied as Pascal and Thoreau, they reveal his fullness of mind and the breadth of his reading.

Among his essays on purely literary subjects are "The Poet in Australia," "Australian Writers," "Kendall," and "A Knot of Flowers." The last-named is a study of Percival Serle's *An Australasian Anthology* (1927), in which he pays particular attention to the poetry of Edward Tregear, Jessie Mackay, Christopher Brennan, Shaw Neilson and Eileen Duggan. His comment on Eileen Duggan is worth quoting: "No woman poet of England moves in the infinite of Eileen Duggan. . . I rank her with Katherine Mansfield, for whom we claim genius. As an old dweller in New Zealand I am proud of them. Though Katherine Mansfield lived in Wellington as a young girl, and Eileen Duggan lives there now, it was not my good fortune to meet them. They were cradling their magic when I was there."

Others of the essays deal with life in early New Zealand, under titles like "Old Poneke," "Old Marlborough," and "Old Wairau." In one he describes himself wading across the square in Blenheim to have a drink with Charles Purkiss, landlord of the Grosvenor Hotel, during a flood in 1873. In another he crosses to Wellington in 1877 to see the English cricketers Shaw, Hill, Emmett and others.

His many notebooks of poems, published and unpublished, reveal some-

thing of his method of working, and are probably the most interesting material in this manuscript collection. But it is clear from a study of these that, despite Jessie Mackay's hope, the best of his poetry had already been published in the four volumes which appeared during his lifetime.

According to the records of the New Zealand Centre of the P.E.N., the Hubert Church Award for Prose was made possible through the generosity of Mrs. Catherine Church, widow of the poet, who before her death made a bequest of shares for the P.E.N. to hold in trust, the interest from which would be enough to provide a prize of five or six guineas annually.

The conditions of the award originally were that it was to be decided not by competition but to mark achievement, as in the case of the Hawthornden, the James Tait Black, and other literary distinctions. It was to be an award for the "best prose published during the previous 12 months, to embrace essays (including newspaper articles), fiction, biography, or any other form of unversified writing." It had to be the work of a New Zealand resident or a foreigner who had been here for five years. The conditions were amended slightly in 1951. Previously the work had to be submitted to the judges through the Secretary of the P.E.N. Later the judges, to be appointed by the executive committee of the New Zealand Centre of the P.E.N., could consider any prose "which has in any way come under his or their notice and which has been published, or if unpublished, has been written, during the previous calendar year." No award could be made to the same person until three years had elapsed since he previously received it. In 1952 the Hubert Church and Jessie Mackay Awards were brought up to £25 per annum by subsidies from the New Zealand Literary Fund.

Despite the existence of the award, and despite the existence of the novels, short stories and essays among the Hubert Church Papers in the Turnbull Library, it is likely that Hubert Church would prefer to be remembered as the young poet writing so well of his adopted land, New Zealand. From this point of view Jessie Mackay was probably right in her judgment that he "will yet hold a high place among the young immortals of these young lands of ours."

The Hubert Church Award has been made to the following writers:—

1945—M. H. Holcroft, for *Timeless World* (judges, Dr. G. H. Scholefield, Professor Ian A. Gordon).

1946—M. H. Holcroft, for *Encircling Seas* (judges, Professor G. W. von Zedlitz, Professor Ian A. Gordon, Stuart Perry).

1947—Lilian C. Keys, for her biography of Thomas Arnold (judges, Professor G. W. von Zedlitz and Dr. G. H. Scholefield).

1948—David Ballantyne, for *The Cunninghamham* (judges, James Bertram and John Moffatt).

1949—Dr. J. C. Beaglehole, for *Victoria University College* (judges, J. C. Reid, Randal Burdon, M. H. Holcroft).

1950—Frank Sargeson, for *Up On To the Roof and Down Again* (judges, M. H. Holcroft, James Bertram).

1951—Janet Frame, for *The Lagoon* (judges, W. J. Scott and John Reece Cole).

1952—Oliver Duff, for his "Sundowner" articles in *The N.Z. Listener* (judges M. K. Joseph and David Hall).

The awards for 1953 and 1954 have not yet been made.