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BOOKS

The Poet in Solitude

SELECTED POEMS, by Walter de la Mare;
Faber and Faber, English price 7.6.

(Reviewed by James K. Baxter)

BETWEEN the nineteen-hundreds and now, there have been huge changes in life and literary thought. Even the rock under the shade of which a poet must pitch his tent, the knowledge of good and evil, seems at times to have shifted on its base. Where there are great changes two kinds of poets can best survive them—the brilliant improviser and the inveterate stoic. I suggest that Walter de la Mare, unlike most of his contemporaries, is the second kind of poet. The grief of knowledge and the knowledge of grief, expressed in the most sensuous and melodious language, has been his constant theme. His poetry is, under the draperies, a modern Book of Ecclesiastes. Those who love de la Mare's poems, the school teachers and the pastoral sympathisers, will disagree with this judgment. The images of ice and fire, sunset rooms and haunted groves, appeal to them as the legitimate special province of poetry. Rather these images reflect de la Mare's acutely honest charting of the unspoken fears of Everyman, fears of moral evil and spiritual isolation—

Nectarous those flowers, yet with venom sweet.

Thick-juiced with poison hang those fruits that shine

Where thick phantasmal moonbeams brood and beat,

And dark imaginations ripe the vine.

Bethink thee: every enticing league thou wend

Beyond the mark where life its bound hath set

Will lead thee at length where human pathways end

And the dark enemy spreads his maddening net.

It is a solitary view of experience, in which the poisonous Tree of Life tempts and betrays; countered only in de la Mare's poetry by a real but over-spiritual Puritan Christianity. The child's world also (from which he draws his hallucinatory imagery) is besieged by premonitions of evil, the poet himself being represented as a child who has somehow escaped the breaching violence of puberty, sealed in his sunset room of imagination, yet menaced like the child by the fangs and claws of darkness. There is serenity in de la Mare's



WALTER DE LA MARE
"His poetry is a modern Book of Ecclesiastes"

later work; but unlike Dylan Thomas, a poet whose vision of life is similarly obsessive and grounded in childhood, he has never come to speak of the "good dark." These matters are perhaps irrelevant to the evaluation of his poetic stature, which is indeed considerable. The volume presents an adequate selection of his work.

WEST AND EAST

AMBASSADOR'S REPORT, by Chester Bowles; Victor Gollancz Ltd., English price 18/-.

FOUR quotations will show what kind of a man Chester Bowles is and the kind of book he has written. The first is a comment on the great range of philosophy and history in the Indian heritage: "Recently I noted that when students in a large American city were asked to learn the hundred most important dates in the history of the world, only one was an Asian event, and that was 1853 when Commodore Perry 'opened' Japan!"

The second quotation is an explanation for Bowles of the reason why "capitalism" is "considered a horrid word in much of Asia": "There are only three ways to make money," an Indian manufacturer explained to me. "You lower the quality of the product, you raise the price or you reduce wages."

The third is a comment on the white man Hillary being knighted and the brown man Tensing being given only a civilian medal: "And in the very response to the joint achievement, the ancient differences of East and West seemed vast. 'Damn good' was the way the Westerner from New Zealand described his feeling on top of the world's highest peak. 'I thought of God and the greatness of His work,' said Tensing."

The fourth quotation is from a postscript: "I also read about the 'book burning' that was supposed to have taken place in some of our information libraries abroad, and I wondered how many Indians remembered my opening-day speeches at several of those reading rooms in which I discussed with such assurance the sacred freedom of the mind."

Mr. Bowles was quite the best available and eligible citizen President Truman could have appointed as United



CHESTER BOWLES
"Humble, charitable, honest"

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