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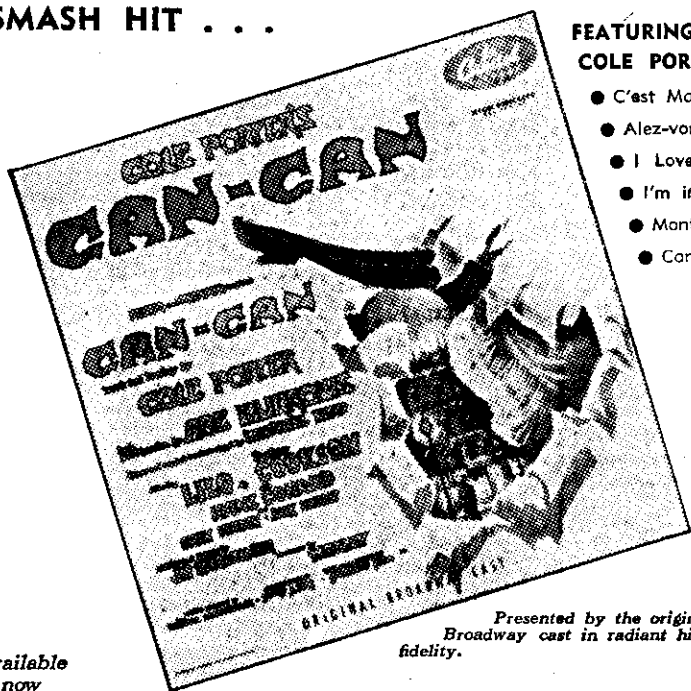
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## Writers and Society

**A**T the beginning of last year a lecture on New Zealand writing was given by Ormond Burton to a Post-Primary English Teachers' Refresher Course at Ardmore. It has now been published\*, and although its treatment of our literature is too sketchy to have much critical value, it puts forward ideas which deserve examination. Mr. Burton has a personal attitude. He believes that our creative advance was delayed by: (1) the Prohibition movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries ("the last of the great Puritan crusades to establish the Kingdom of God by the sword of the law"); (2) "the long struggle between materialistic humanism and the main body of the Christian Church for the control of education"; and (3) New Zealand's participation in two world wars.

In the early part of his lecture Mr. Burton is preoccupied with the wasteful use of energy. If too much of it is drained off in social or political action, not enough is available for creative expression. For instance, the Prohibition crusade led to "a period of exhaustion for certain very energetic groups." The implication here is that the energetic groups might otherwise have supported a literary movement. And it is flatly contradicted by Mr. Burton's final argument, which is that the best way to foster creative activity is "the acceptance of missions that have nothing to do directly with writing but which through their fiery movements stir men so deeply that there is nothing else they can do to resolve the intolerable tensions created than to find expression in the most powerful of all creative actions—that of the written word." According to this theory the Prohibition movement, which "mobilised behind it enor-

mous energy and the finest and most unselfish idealism New Zealand has known," should have touched off some good writing; but Mr. Burton has already said himself that it was sterile, and led only to spiritual exhaustion. The latter view is more credible than the former. Yet both seem to need support from a metaphysical attitude which is nowhere stated, and without it they are irrelevant to the study of writing.

A writer may be influenced by social tensions: he can be moved by pity and indignation and a hatred of cruelty. But influences are not sources. A writer can ignore the controversial themes of his time and place, and still reach greatness. The creative mood is his own; it needs no incitement of banners and trumpets from the streets. Tensions which drive him towards expression are most likely to be congenital: they are fed by experience, by personal relationships, or by neurotic responses to his frictions with a society which does not accept him. It is the nature of a writer to be a non-conformist. The rebel may sometimes sound an alarm and support a cause; but he is more likely to stand aloof and look about him with an artist's detachment. What he needs most of all is not a sense of social mission or a climate of opinion in which missions can be fostered, but an economic system which supports enough people who can be interested in the arts. If a writer knows that people will read his books, he will continue to write them; and he will find his subjects in a flat time as well as in a time of spiritual excitement. There will be more and better writers as the nation becomes older and larger; but we have quite a few already, and they are not unlike writers elsewhere. As for greatness: it cannot be coaxed, and is sometimes not noticed when it comes.

\*Spring Fire, by Ormond Burton; the Book Centre Ltd., Auckland, 4/-.

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