

BOOKS

Vigorous Native Growth

SWEET WHITE WINE, by Guthrie Wilson; Robert Hale, English price 12/6. *MOONSHINE*, by Helen Wilson; Paul's Book Arcade, Hamilton, 10/6.

(Reviewed by G. C. A. Wall)

GUTHRIE WILSON'S first three novels showed what is patronisingly called "promise." In *Sweet White Wine* that promise is fulfilled, generously. To this reader, at least, it is by a wide margin the best New Zealand novel of the post-war era.

Simon Gregg, the narrator, a successful novelist at 51, reviews his lifelong friendship with the ambitious Paul Mundy. Rivalry, companionship, estrangement, reconciliation, and a final betrayal with Jean, Simon's wife. At 51 Simon can shrug the last breach away, ruefully and honestly, with a tolerant humanity for the follies of his friend, his wife, and himself.

It is a novel with a limited objective and Mr. Wilson achieves it with a cool subtlety, a sureness, that make most satisfying reading. The flaws in the successful Paul are revealed obliquely through the narrator's unwilling admiration for him; the wife condemns herself not in Simon's eye, but in the reader's. Simon's bewilderment at his own thoughts and actions, and his coming-to-terms with them are delicately and skilfully done. The few minor characters are lightly sketched in, but so surely that one could do with more of them—the horrific mother-in-law especially.

Moonshine was written by Helen Wilson when she was 60, and was published ten years later when book circulation was restricted by the war. Its reappearance now is very welcome, for it is good reading. A pity, perhaps, that Mrs. Wilson elected to write it in the first person of the opposite sex never seems to come off. (Emily Brontë's Mr. Lockwood and Wilkie Collins's Miss Clack are devices, not characters, after all.)

Despite this, it's a good story, well told. The guileless young schoolmaster, landed in a savage Irish community in South Canterbury, is unwillingly initiated into the communal industry of illicit whisky distillation. Innocently he antagonises the dangerous, enigmatic distributor of the local product (one wonders what it was like) and a settler's daughter risks her life in warning him to escape before it is too late. It's melodramatic, especially in the closing chapters. The pitiful squalor of the settlers, their charm and treachery, could easily be dismissed as exaggerated, but we have Mrs. Wilson's autobiography to support their accuracy. A final regret is that the preoccupations of her hard-working life have given us only these two or three late-autumn flowers—we have so few.

Both *Sweet White Wine* and *Moonshine* are New Zealand books. Both are inspired and shaped by the country, vigorous native growth. Neither Wilson stoops to affectation, nor to the whimpering self-pity that has characterised so much of New Zealand writing. Both books are written by adults for adults, and both are first-class of their kind.

THE SHAKEN EARTH

THE LISBON EARTHQUAKE, by T. D. Kendrick; Methuen and Co., English price 21/-.

ALMOST exactly two hundred years ago the Lisbon earthquake occurred—a calamity which affected the people



GUTHRIE WILSON
Objective achieved

of that age as much as the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima has affected us in this century. The earthquake lasted about ten minutes. It shook the whole south-west corner of Portugal. Between ten thousand and fifteen thousand people lost their lives in Lisbon alone, from the effect of fire, falling buildings, and the overflowing of the River Tagus.

Sir Thomas Kendrick, Director of the British Museum, has traced in this book the effect of the calamity on popular thinking. Throughout Europe men's minds were shaken; the sense, easily held in times of prosperity, of a beneficent natural and supernatural order gave place to spiritual insecurity and fear of God's wrath. The priests of Portugal blamed the sins of the Portuguese; the Jansenists groaned that Lisbon was the cradle of the Jesuits; Voltaire proved that philosophical optimism was meaningless in the face of human tragedy. It is a fascinating story, and the author presents it with balance and understanding. But one remembers most the acts of courage and charity—the injured priest ministering to the survivors; the doctors and Government officials bringing order out of chaos and calming an hysterical populace. Here perhaps is the deeper meaning of the catastrophe, not Divine retribution nor an occasion for scientific rationality, but a courageous human response to the suffering of others.

—James K. Baxter

EROS AND AGAPE

SIX PEOPLE AND LOVE, by Stella Ziliacus; Putnam, English price 13/6. *THE FLIGHT FROM THE ENCHANTER*, by Iris Murdoch; Chatto and Windus, English price 15/-. *THE QUEEN'S KNIGHT*, by Marvin Barowsky; Chatto and Windus, English price 15/-. *THE MAGNIFICENT ENEMIES*, by Edgar Maas; Chatto and Windus, English price 15/-.

EROS is international; Agape is not.

Miss Ziliacus (daughter to Konni Ziliacus) is concerned with both. Her book is made up of six studies in the form of a novel, and the scene shifts about from Geneva to Warsaw to Stockholm, etc. The manners are always excellent, no matter how great the passion: the language is adequate, urbane, and never unexpected; the style is discursive and undramatic. On the subject of Eros Miss Ziliacus is unexciting; with Agape



listeners



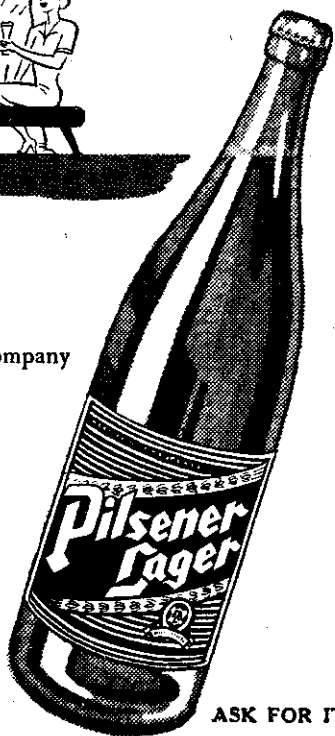
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