

Visitor from Australia

STATE patronage of literature in Australia is more than justified by the results, Dr Colin Roderick, visiting Australian author and broadcaster, told *The Listener* in a recent interview.

Noted for his literary research, especially for his identification of the English convict James Tucker as the author of the classic *Ralph Rashleigh*, Dr Roderick's interest is by no means confined to literary origins—it includes most aspects of the problems confronting the writer and the publisher of books in Australia and New Zealand. He is education editor for the publishing firm of Angus and Robertson L'd., successful novelist, and a leading figure of the committee for the Chair of Australian Literature Fund of Sydney University.

"A lot of money is spent by the Commonwealth Literary Fund in the award of Fellowships to writers. These Fellowships, ranging from £500 to £1000, give a writer economic security for the length of time needed to produce a novel or a scholarly work. Marjorie Barnard's historical work, *Macquarie's World*, an extended essay on the life and times of Governor Macquarie, was written with the aid of such a fellowship." This book, said Dr Roderick, was now not only a recognised classic, but a regular seller on the Australian market; one clear indication of the value of such Fellowships.

Another way the Fund worked was to guarantee publishers against loss. One outstanding example of a book whose publication was assured through such a guarantee was Judah Waten's book of short stories, *Alien Sun*.

"This was not only a work of literary merit," said Dr Roderick, "but one which also proved to have great popular appeal. Because of this the publishers had no need to make a claim on the fund. The important thing to remember here, though, is that if the publisher hadn't been in a position to claim, the book might never have been published."

These subsidies that guarantee against publishers' loss are extensively applied in the publication of poetry, we were told. Three collections mentioned were by women, and the point was made that—in contrast with New Zealand—some of the best of contemporary Australian poetry was written by women.

In Australia no reference was made on either the imprint or title page to the fact that a work had been published with the aid of the Fund.

"There are two reasons for this," Dr Roderick said. "First, the Commonwealth Government does not wish the public to ascribe the book to them; secondly, the publisher believes the public will buy a work more readily if no reference is made to the Fund. Up to three years ago we did, in fact, make the acknowledgment, but we have since found it an advantage not to do so."

Radio was a potent factor in the shaping of the public attitude to Australian literature, he went on. "Since 1946, a radio version of an Australian novel has been broadcast in 15-minute episodes every morning of the working week. The first book done was Dorothy Cottrell's *The Singing Gold*, at that time almost unknown, though it had been published in 1926. This year the first Australian edition came out, and it is to be a prescribed text at the school certificate level." Though TV in Australia was only in its infancy, Dr Roderick said, the impact of the national literature was such that on one station there was a weekly session,



N.P.S. photograph

DR COLIN RODERICK

Books and their Authors, devoted entirely to living Australian writers.

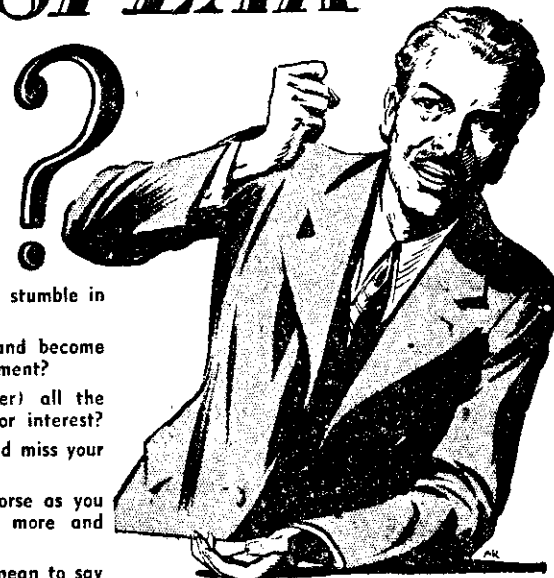
We then asked Dr Roderick for his view on the differences between Australian and New Zealand literature—why the vitality of the novel was greater there, and why New Zealand's greatest literary strength was in her poets.

"While Australian poetry has had nothing to teach such poets as Fairbairn, Glover and Baxter," he said, "there is a world of inspiration in Australia for the New Zealand novelist. The nature of historical and social development in both countries is so much the same that the attitudes arrived at by our novelists make their work a natural study for the New Zealander. In Australia the accent on writing is in the main sociological. We are as a nation most keenly alive to the welfare of the people, and there has been a strong consciousness of this for decades. When the population of our country was much smaller it was hazardous for the publisher to undertake publishing the novels that were the natural expression of this social interest. Nevertheless, as early as 1903, the Sydney *Bulletin* published in book form Tom Collins's socially critical novel, *Such is Life*. The characteristics of Collins's work, together with that of Henry Lawson, have ever since been the touchstone of the significance of our prose fiction." The powerful satire of Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*, published in 1933, and dealing with the maladministration of the Northern Territory, marked the maturity of this attitude, said Dr Roderick.

"The difference between the Australian and New Zealand approach arises not only from the difference in population, but also through the nature of the sub-conscious critical approach of the writer to his own work," he said. "The New Zealander comes to his work with the aesthete peering over his shoulder; the Australian sees thousands of ordinary men and women looking at him face to face."

Where Australian drama was concerned, concluded Dr Roderick, it was only since it came down to earth that it had won public support. He instanced Ray Lawlor's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, a realistic play dealing with the life of Queensland cane-cutters in Melbourne during the off-season. An all-Australian cast have just left to present this highly successful work in London, New York, and San Francisco.

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