

# A. R. D. FAIRBURN

## —a Note

A. R. D. FAIRBURN was a man of so many parts and such a wide range of interests and activities that it is probably only now when he is dead that we will be able to get a picture of him in the round. He was loved by so many people for so many different reasons that it will take time to discover fully how great a New Zealander he was. *Listener* readers are likely to know only one side of him—the writer and provocative correspondent who did so much to enliven us, mock us, amuse or abuse us. He was the Socratic gadfly of his generation, a disputant who never refused a challenge. But if it is true we see him best in print, it is also to be remembered that he was an indefatigable private correspondent, bombarding all parts of the Dominion with several letters a day, to such an extent and volume that post office revenue will now undoubtedly sink. Everything he did was marked with enormous zest, from his flights of boisterous fantasy to his solid disquisitions on compost, or the state of the Auckland Art Gallery, or the site of the university. Through it all laughter blew in great gusts. He was quick to see incongruity in himself and in others even when most serious. But he was never known to speak malice against any man, save to blow him down with the tornado of his polemic.

Picture the man as he was commonly seen—a six-foot-two sandalled figure in easy, unconventional clothes, his movements charged with grace and nobility. He would take long strides, a knapsack of books and bits and pieces over his shoulder, a curved cherrywood in his mouth. The eyes crackling with laughter and life, though there was a disturbing sadness in them, too.

The first time I saw him was in Auckland when I arrived in a baby open

"Our best satirist and only humourist . . ."



tourer. He surveyed it rapidly, said, "Hm, it's bad but it's British," and without bothering to open a door stepped easily into the back seat, whence he engaged me in earnest praise of golf—which game, little known to me, I was to play with him that very instant. We had to go through a hole in the hedge at the ninth, because he had not been able to pay his subscription for some years. His first shot was a slice right over the top of the pine trees. Like Dr Grace with the bails, he calmly placed

another ball and it was one of the most glorious drives I have seen.

This may seem an irrelevancy; but it serves to stress he was athletic in body and mind. His sandals would carry him, talking as he went, mile after mile in the country or the mountains. He had a natural affinity with water as well as ink, and swam and yachted whenever he could get away. He could use tools with instinctive skill—one friend says he made them appear twice life-size—and he could perform surely on the keyboard. Everything seemed to come naturally and with enjoyment. He could talk anatomy to an anatomist, and to dispute with philosophers was as easy as to build a boat. One economist came to me and said with awed voice, "That man's read books on economics only professors should have heard of." He was a good painter, and spent his last years lecturing on art at the university. For all that he dominated every company I saw him in, he was quite without vanity, and quite unconscious of his own importance.

It is in his writing—and there is much yet to be published—he will be readiest seen as a great New Zealander. (He was proud to be a fourth generation New Zealander, and highly amused to be called a failed missionary.) His three long poems, *Dominion*, *The Voyage*, and *To a Friend in the Wilderness*, are the best long poems we have. His other collection, *Strange Rendezvous*, shows the range of his ability in shorter pieces: the author of our most biting satire has also written some of the most beautiful lyrics I know. And there is that other Fairburn with his roaring excursions into the rare world of fantastic humour—the Fairburn of *How to Ride a Bicycle in Seventeen Lovely Colours* and *The Sky is a Limpet*. Our best satirist and only humorist, Fairburn was a phenomenon without a touch of the commonplace.

—D.G.



TWO New Zealand poets, James K. Baxter (left), of Wellington, and R. A. K. Mason, of Auckland, will be heard from YC stations at 7.30 p.m. on Wednesday, April 17, in an appreciation of A. R. D. Fairburn. R. A. K. Mason, who is of the same generation as A. R. D. Fairburn, will talk about the man he knew; James K. Baxter, one of the younger poets, will speak of the legacy he leaves. A reading of one of A. R. D. Fairburn's best-known poems, "To a Friend in the Wilderness," will follow these two short talks. It is particularly fitting that "To a Friend in the Wilderness" should be included in a broadcast tribute, for this poem had its first publication in a reading from *1YC* in 1951. The reader is William Austin.

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 12, 1957.

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