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BOOKS

Shop-window for Poets

NEW ZEALAND POETRY YEARBOOK.
Vol. 6, edited by Louis Johnson; Pegasus Press, 10s. 6.

(Reviewed by Joan Stevens)

POETRY YEARBOOK is, contrary to expectation, still with us, rising six this year, and healthy in spite of setbacks. I am glad, because the 1956 material is good, an improvement on that of previous years in both quality and balance of choice.

Only six poets are newcomers to the Yearbook, none of them unknown men, at least to the Little Magazine public. Yearbook is, thus, not a discoverer of new stars, but a national shopwindow for poets wanting readers. Its display function is the more valuable because publishing costs are putting individual publication out of the reach of all but established writers.

Thirty New Zealand poets appear, and one German in translation, Karl Wolfskehl, who was noted and quoted in 1955. There is no "school" or "movement" to be plucked out of what these thirty have to say. The voices vary, which is proper. Some are rhetorical, some dry and stringy, some thickened with the muscular efforts of expression. Personally, I do not enjoy or understand every poem, but only a few are trivial in content or inept in craft. Most are worth struggling with, some hit the mark at once. If I risk a generalisation, it would be that there is less New Zealandism of Land and People than there used to be, and more of personal matters. Poets such as Smithyman, Doyle, Spencer, Stead, are concerned with "man's meaning, and the world's," rather than with insular experiences. Satire is still concerned with local manifestations, of course. Vogt's "Songs for a Bolshie-Yank Duo" is rather heavy-footed, but Baxter's shrewdly barbed mockeries stick in the mind; we could do with more of them. Otherwise, we seem to have moved away from the need to adopt "Attitudes for a New Zealand Poet," just as we are leaving behind the descriptive water-colour poem. (Though W. D. Leadbetter puts one to good romantic use.)

The most memorable work comes from Baxter. ("The Clown's Coat," "Crossing the Straits"), Doyle ("Starlings and History"), Oliver ("Gestures in the Sun," "Canto on a Hot Summer's Day"), and Smithyman. Ruth Dallas is successful in "Singing in the Backyard," a poem for broadcasting which in its nostalgia as well as its echoes, has overtones of Ursula Bethell and Robin Hyde. James Bertram contributes *Poems for Horses*, light Yeatsian verse, of which "Maria" effectively revives the ballad tone and local references of Seaforth Mackenzie. The other poets are here, too, whom we have come to look for in such a collection—Brasch, Johnson, Curnow, Ruth Gilbert, Gloria Rawlinson, Glover.

The greatest space is given to Wolfskehl, 10 pages out of an 80-page book being devoted to Peter Dronke's translation of his 1950 *Job* sequence. I doubt if this is justified. *Job* is very German-Hebrew poetry, thick and viscous with symbolism, and, as was admitted in Yearbook, 1955, "Transcending the limits of translation." Some of it may be rewarding, if you are prepared to persevere, but surely so much non-English material overweights a book of New Zealand verse?

This is a lesser grumble, however, as are my complaints about the misprints, and the mistakes in the bibliography. More serious is the question of the Editorial. Yearbook, 1956, is a worthwhile collection of current writing in this country; why, then, is the introductory comment so petty, shrill, perfunctory? After explaining his decision to continue publication, Mr Johnson laments the alleged unsaleability/unpopularity of poetry here, basing his remarks on one of *The Listener's* minor correspondence matches which, he claims, gives "a vivid insight" into our attitudes to art. I doubt it. Anyway, I am reminded of the preacher who lambasted his assembled congregation for the non-churchgoing sins of others. Next, Mr Johnson accuses *The Listener* of discriminating against poetry, blames our education system for failing to "inculcate a more liberal spirit in our community," and dismisses his opposition as the "ravings of the badly informed." In spite of these local discouragements, however, he says, editor and publisher went ahead with Yearbook. I think they did the right thing, but Mr Johnson does neither poets nor publishers any service by providing a satisfactory anthology with so unsatisfactory an introduction. However, try the rest of the book.

EMINENT AMERICANS

THROUGH THESE MEN, by John Mason Brown; Hamish Hamilton, English price 18s.

IN this book of biographical notes and character sketches, an eminent American dramatic critic turns from the Broadway stage to the Washington arena. He has selected "these men" as outstanding examples, in their respective fields, of America's policy makers and opinion moulders. They include Eisenhower, Stevenson, Henry Cabot Lodge, Supreme Court Justice Frankfurter, Walter Lippmann and J. Robert Oppenheimer.

The date of publication in America, early last year, was obviously timed to catch the rising tide of interest in the November Presidential election. In a way, this is a pity, because a good deal of the section devoted to the 1952 Party Conventions and campaigning is now as out of date as the commentaries on the 1952 Olympic Games. But although Stevenson has retired to his Chicago law office, Ike is still very much with us, and readers will find in the outline



JUSTICE FRANKFURTER
"The judicial radical"

N.Z. LISTENER, JUNE 21, 1957.