

It is no new thing in New Zealand to hear complaints about writers' difficulties and the apathy of both the public and the publishers. Twenty-five years ago a small band of women got together to do something about it, and the result was the New Zealand Women Writers' Society. Next week, July 8-12, the society is celebrating its Silver Jubilee, and as well as the various activities planned in Wellington for members, the society is hoping that through radio, press reports, and displays of books throughout the country, they can bring before the reading public the work of New Zealand women writers.

Radio programmes planned will include talks from *Book Shop* and *2YA's Radio Digest*, while in the Women's Sessions Mrs Isobel Andrews will talk on "Women's Contribution to New Zealand Literature" for the National stations, and Mrs Alison Drummond will discuss "The Housewife as Writer" for the Commercial Division.

The society was founded in Wellington by Miss Nellie Donovan (now Mrs Gordon Hair, of Sydney) on July 11, 1932. A group of young women, interested in writing and art, formed the society to help each other in their work and investigate the possibilities of publication. One of their first activities was to get in touch with established and experienced writers and ask for their help. This help was readily forthcoming, and many of these writers joined the new society, which had among its members such well-known names as Nellie E. Coad, Eileen Duggan, Isobel Young (now Mrs Isobel Andrews), Nelle Scanlan, Mrs Isabel M. Cluett (Isabel M. Peacocke), Jane Mander, Mrs William Moore (Dora Wilcox), Edith Howes, Jessie Mackay and Elsie K. Morton.

The society has aimed at encouraging creative work in literature and in developing friendship among members. It is especially of help to inexperienced writers, who join as associate members and on the publication of a certain amount of work of an acceptable standard become full members. Last year seven writers graduated this way. As associate members they receive all the help possible, and they are free to join in the competitions which the society holds. These include work for the Donovan Cups for poetry and short stories, the Shakespeare Cup for a magazine article, the Phillips Cup for work for children, the Cottrell trophy for work with a Maori motif, the Shelley prize for a sonnet, and the special competition for associate members. Lately the society has been replacing the cups with a book token and book plate as a record of success.



WOMEN WRITERS' JUBILEE

Much of the work done for these competitions is later sold by the writers concerned, and in this way some members have made outstanding progress in their writing. Among those who acknowledge the society's help are Nancy

Other novelists in the society, as well as those mentioned earlier, include Ngaio Marsh, Henrietta Mason, Grace Phipps, Florence Preston, Mrs C. Mann, Mrs J. O'Hagen Hill, Mavis Winder and N. E. Coad (whose works are mainly historical). Past members have been the late Helen Wilson and Dorothy Eden, now in London. Members whose poetry is well known include Eileen Duggan, Ruth Gilbert (Mrs J. B. Mackay, recently president of the society), Bennie Thomson, and Helen Clyde and Lillian Crisp, who write verse for children.

The society also includes Stella Jones, whose play *The Tree* has had professional performance in England; Marie Bullock, writer of plays and short stories; Mrs Joyce Thom (Jillian Squire, author of *Family Daze* and other radio scripts and short stories), Celia Manson, Avis Acres (who writes and illustrates children's books, including the Hutu and Kawa series), Olive Wright, who translated D'Urville's diaries for publication; Mrs G. F. Hall (Claire Mallory), who writes for school-girls; Mrs Florence Mackenzie, a historical writer on Queenstown, and Rita Snowden, who has published 24 books on religious themes.

Mrs Margaret Kelly, the current president, described to *The Listener* the work the society has done.

"Over the years," she said, "the society has proved its value to the community in providing a link between women writers in New Zealand, and in giving an incentive to writing, especially during the war years, when avenues for publication diminished to almost nothing. Through the monthly meetings, competitions, and the Bulletin, members were encouraged to continue their writing. We have found in the society a wonderful spirit of friendship, a sincere appreciation of what is accomplished and an unselfish desire to help those who need assistance."

This friendship has been particularly appreciated by those living in the country, who have found membership a stimulus to continue their work, and some who had even given up writing have made a new start and produced some excellent work. In North Auckland and the Waikato, "solitary" writers

have formed groups, often travelling long distances to meetings. In Auckland there is another branch.

"Naturally," Mrs Kelly said, "the society does not claim the credit for all the successes of its members. We do know that it has been a great help in raising the quality of work done by many of them, and in helping them to find markets. Since the war opportunities for publication have increased, and the result has been an upsurge of vitality and industry among writers. Much has been published here and overseas by New Zealand women, but mostly in the lighter fiction class. Short stories, articles, radio scripts, and to a lesser degree, poetry, have found many markets.

"From this point we must go further, considering what contribution the New Zealand woman writer can make to our country's literature. I feel that the danger lies in complacency—in taking the 'popular appeal' line—the pleasure of seeing one's name in print. Literature demands that we must probe more deeply, coming to know New Zealand in its more mature and exciting form, and seeing its idiosyncrasies along with its universalities. Women writers tend to show up best in the field of novel writing, but with few exceptions our novelists have felt no great compulsion to survey the national scene and wake the national conscience."

Mrs Kelly would like to see the Silver Jubilee beginning a new phase in the society's existence, a phase in which members re-examined their attitudes as writers. She feels that it is on this plan that the society must base its future.

"Because we lead comparatively easy and pleasant lives," she said, "this does not dispense with the necessity for effort of thought. Greater countries have produced great literature from the more obvious conflict of social problems. Our conflict must come from within—we must struggle to combat our complacency, our comfortable 'middle way.' If in the next 25 years the New Zealand Women Writers' Society can show progress to parallel that of its first 25 years, this must be in the quality and context of writing produced."



BOOKPLATE (by E. Mervyn Taylor) of the N.Z. Women Writers' Society

Bruce, writer of short stories and poetry; (Mrs) Dorothy Black, who has written short stories and plays, including *The Montgomeries of Glenholme*; Helen Clyde, who writes verse for children; and Mrs T. G. Ebbett ("Eva Burfield"), who has had her first novel accepted since joining the society.

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