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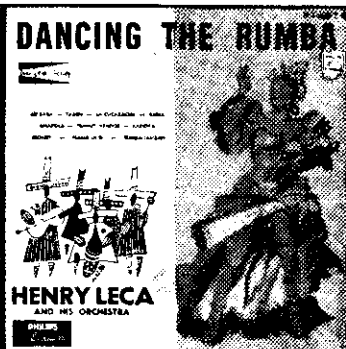
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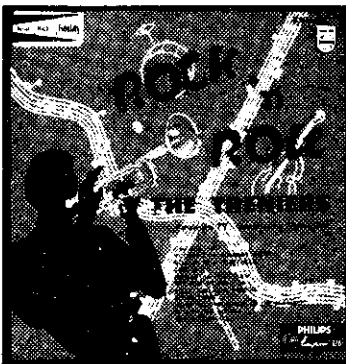
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Our First Anthologists

AN event of 50 years ago in New Zealand literary history is recalled by the death of William Frederick Alexander, who, from 1920 to 1946, edited the *Dunedin Evening Star*. This was the publication in 1906 in the "Canterbury Poets" series (Walter Scott Company, of London) of *New Zealand Verse*, which I believe to have been the first anthology of New Zealand poetry published overseas. If I am wrong on this point, I should welcome correction. The book was also, I should say, the most important collection yet made in New Zealand. In it Fred Alexander collaborated with A. E. Currie (Ernest), who has long been prominent in the legal and literary life of Wellington.

The "Canterbury Poets" series has been out of print for many years, and seems to be well-nigh forgotten. The other day I saw a couple of copies among the books from a private library that a leading second-hand bookshop had rejected. But in its day the series may have done more to popularise poetry than anything else of the kind. Over 100 volumes were listed in the Alexander-Currie book. They ranged over English, "colonial," American, European, and ancient classical literature; were solidly and attractively got up in pocket form; and the cheapest edition cost a shilling. They included some valuable anthologies, such as *Sonnets of the Century*, *Sonnets of Europe*, and that delightful collection of old French forms, *Ballades and Rondeaux*, drawn from many writers in England and America. Today the series is particularly valuable for its minor poets.

New Zealand Verse was edited by two young men who were friends in Christchurch. Both were educated at the Christchurch Boys' High School. In 1906, when the book was published, Alexander, a sub-editor on the *Press*, was 24, and Currie, a law student or law clerk, 22. They must have been substantially younger when they began the work. It would be interesting to know if any other standard anthology has been edited at such early ages.

But the collection was well made, and the lengthy introduction showed no sign of immaturity. It was scholarly and well written, with insight and style.

It neither apologised nor depreciated unduly, nor boasted, but stated fairly, understandingly and brightly, the facts of literary achievement in this new country and the promise of development.

So New Zealand poetry was put modestly on the world map. I do not know what the response was in Britain, except that I have been told one reviewer said New Zealand played football better than it wrote poetry (this was soon after the triumphant tour of the All Blacks), but I am sure the book



W. F. ALEXANDER

did much to spread interest here. It can be called, I think, the father of our anthologies. The editors revised and enlarged it in *A Treasury of New Zealand Verse*, published locally in 1926.

There have also been Quentin Pope's *Kowhai Gold* (London, 1930); Allen Curnow's two-edition collection (these two editors limited themselves in period); the Australian-New Zealand anthologies published by the Oxford University Press in Melbourne; and, recently, the *Oxford Book of New Zealand Verse*. However old-fashioned the modernist may consider the 1906 volume to be, it was a landmark in our letters, and should not be neglected by the student.

Fred Alexander had a passion for literature and a fine taste, which he used to good purpose in his newspaper work. During his long editorship in Dunedin, he gave the *Star* a strong literary flavour, and a number of outside writers were indebted to him for a hearing. In the history of our literature and journalism, activities which are so often inseparable, he should be remembered.

—Alan Mulgan

Good Looks

THOUGH good looks might sometimes disguise a book that on closer acquaintance we'd just as soon not know, books (like people) should make the most of themselves. Yet most of us, says Harold Gilmore in a talk to be heard on Tuesday, September 10, from 3YC (and later from other YC stations), have at some time or other known books we've wanted to read which we couldn't face because they were so badly dressed. Mr Gilmore, a librarian at Canterbury University College, who will be giving the first of three talks with the general title *The Look of a Book*, starts by saying that a book looks right when all its parts—paper, type, illustrations, binding, jacket—fit in with one another and with the subject matter and style of the book. "When we come across books like this," he says, "we appreciate them more if we know something about the people whose taste, judgment and technical skill made the books possible."



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