

THEATRE UNDER FIRE

THEATRE IN DANGER, by Bruce Mason and John Pocock; Paul's Book Arcade, 8 6.

(Reviewed by S. F. Johnston)

THE purpose of these six long-ish letters is stated by Dr Pocock: "... to discuss the present state of the New Zealand theatre and the canons of criticism that can legitimately be applied to it." The first three letters are concerned with the establishment of standards and the recording of disillusion. "The theatre is an essentially direct art... The qualities the actor must display... are those of directness, plainness and virility." Both writers find that the "pattern of speech" is the chief thing that actors must work at. Their discovery of a poverty in dramatic art both here and overseas is set against their experiences in the only two New Zealand groups that have met their requirements. The first letter from each correspondent ends in a rather gloomy discussion of the seemingly universal "decadence," of which "the prevailing cult of the artificial" in the theatre is a manifestation. The New Zealand Players, in all but a few of their productions, are seen as blatant and unrepentant offenders. Dr Pocock is particularly severe (though never as rude as the dust-jacket blurb—one of the blurbiest I've read for a long time—hopes he is). He concludes that "the last three years in New Zealand dramatic work have been singularly bad."

This criticism is well-founded and forthright: and they blaze away, as big guns should, with gusto and good aim. The later part of the correspondence I found less entertaining and less persuasive. The long letters do not lend themselves to terse directness and the restrictions of the form become at times too apparent. There is too little real exchange of opinion, of argument and rebuttal, of point by point disagreement. The final impression of what they think is not as clear and as sharply memorable as those of their predecessors in this form of dramatic criticism.

The chief themes of this later part of the book are "the relative positions of verse and prose plays," and "what it is

like to be a playwright in New Zealand." There is nothing very new in what they say on the first of these, but their points are made in relation to contemporary drama. Dr Pocock is vigorously opposed to T. S. Eliot's theory and practice, but to some extent the Eliot he dislikes is of his own making. He makes the good point that Eliot's concern that an audience should not be conscious of verse in the theatre as verse smacks of an urge for naturalistic illusion, but he hardly does justice to Eliot's real point, his insistence on a dramatic verse which is not a decorative distraction. "The fantastic notion that poetry has to sound like ordinary speech" would be equally fantastic to Eliot, who argues for a relationship between dramatic verse and the common man's speech, not an identity of them. Using Charles Williams to teach Eliot that the Elizabethans recognised verse as verse and accepted it as a dramatic convention would have delighted them both.

Mr Mason's chief concern in his later letters is with the second of these themes and he has some important things to say about the difficulties in getting contemporary New Zealand life into touch with a world of universals and invisibles. His detailed discussion of his own plays is unselfconscious and very lively. Throughout both write on the New Zealand theatre with force and conviction. Their righteous indignation tends to colour their wider view and even distort it. The dissection of the prevailing decadence is a little too slick and sweeping and the insistence on speech as the chief element in drama leaves room for no full-throated affirmation of the primacy of action. The value of this correspondence lies in its discussion of New Zealand dramatic activity. Outside this the quality falls off and, in Mr Mason's curious conception of the relationship of Ibsen to the Europe of his time, disappears.

THE CONSERVATIVE MIND

CONSERVATISM IN AMERICA, by Clinton Rossiter; Heinemann, English price 21/-.

THE hot, optimistic currents of 18th century thought were so devastating that there is still need, so it seems, to fight against them with persistence and

ingenuity, and Mr Rossiter vigorously enters the lists. For him there is still an unresolved conflict between the faith that human nature is good and man perfectible under the guidance of reason, and the bracing realisation that man is evil and his history a tragedy. Too much, he feels, has been written about America on the basis of a facile liberalism. This book gallops through American history, with apt and argumentative comment, aiming at a radical re-assessment. That which is liberal has been conventionally presented as good. Mr Rossiter explains that, in so far as it was good, the merit lay in conservative elements, long understressed. He is a scholar, writing for the common man, or at least for the common man with intellectual interests. Accordingly, he occasionally departs, with an engagingly apologetic shudder, from academic austerity to give summarising dogmatism, neat cataloguing of complex considerations and agile colloquialisms. His conclusion is an exhortation.

To a non-American reader the argument is sometimes overloaded with mere names, and occasionally preoccupied with the allocation of verbal labels. The preliminary analysis of what constitutes Conservatism sometimes has its feet off the earth. Nevertheless, the book is brisk, purposeful and persuasive. Paradoxically, though, in its analysis "shallow optimism" is anathema, its overall impact is of reasoned, even vehement, hopefulness. After all, virtue and stability may be attained, though only by hard application and sacrifice. The "lunatic Right" and the political magic of an 18th century vision can alike be exorcised by purposeful recognition of the unchangeable laws of human behaviour. Intelligent and courageous conservatism holds the key, and Mr Rossiter is equally eloquent about past failures and future opportunities.

—F. L. W. Wood

EXPLORING GREENLAND

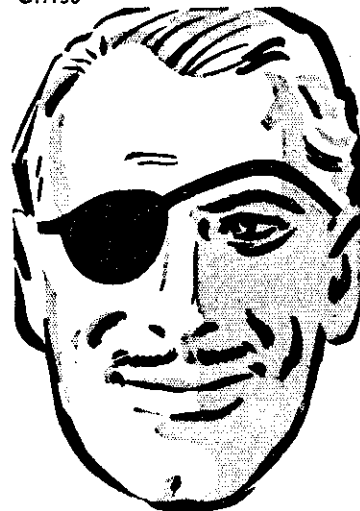
NORTH ICE, by Commander C. J. W. Simpson; Hodder and Stoughton, English price 37/6.

THE leader of the British North Greenland Expedition has told simply its story covering the years 1952 to 1954. It is one of triumph and fortitude, of mechanical skills and spiritual exaltations. Whether read as adventure, geography, or narrative, the account is satisfying at every level.

Commander Simpson sublimated unrealised ambitions for the Himalayas by years of preparation for his Greenland expedition. He had to travel in the company of experienced Danish explorers, fight apathy in the services that must support him, scrounge for funds, judge men wisely and choose compatible teams, face responsibility, loneliness and death, and always bear in mind the distant goal. His book justifies all his hopes, gives full credit to the 30 men under his command, and brings to life the trials, misfortunes and successes of the hard Arctic years. He has continued the

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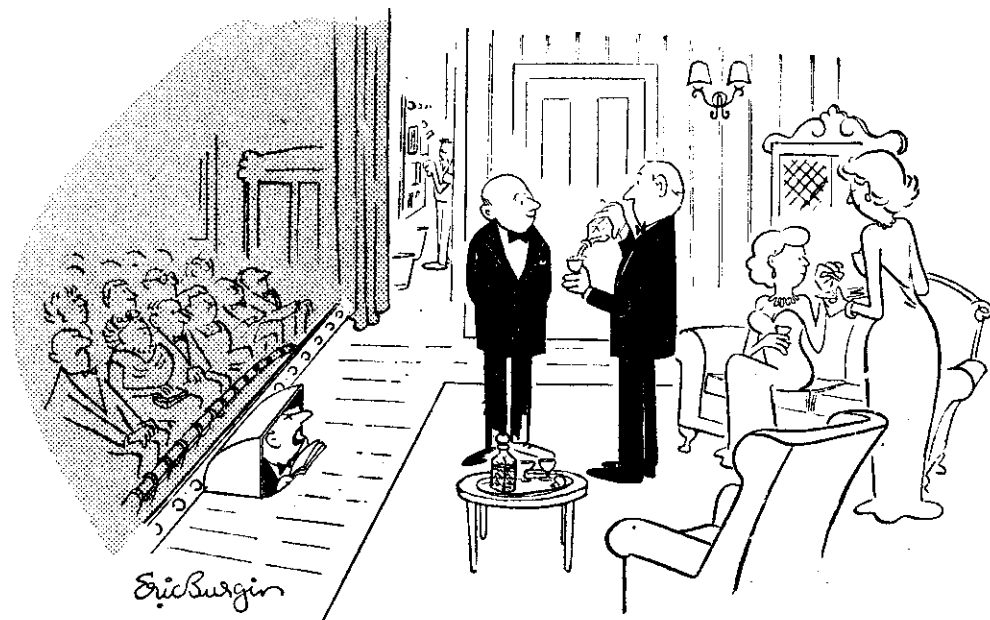
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