

THE SKY TOO BIG

THE WORLD REGAINED, by Dennis McEldowney; Chapman and Hall, N.Z. price 12 9.

(Reviewed by David Hall)

THIS is a straightforward, modest account of a young man's recovery from a crippling disability and a plain statement of what his recovery means to him. The immediate reflection it provokes in this reviewer's mind is how appallingly little understanding we have of the handicapped. How often and how grievously must we blunder as, well-intentioned and full of self-congratulating kindness, we advance upon the afflicted with the importunity of our good deeds.

Dennis McEldowney, bed-ridden after a few years of almost normal school life, makes no complaint against those "who, knowing I had time on my hands, were anxious to fill it for me," but he mentions that his energies were fully absorbed in just keeping alive. Although he had strong literary interests, he could manage only one monthly article and in two years read only 24 books, some of them brief. "As a naturally sociable person, I seesawed between lamenting that not enough people came to see me, and, when my hopes were fulfilled, hoping they would not stay too long."

He was a "blue baby," "born with a congenital heart condition known as Fallot's tetralogy. . . The effect on the victim is much the same as the effect of high altitude on climbers. I have always had a fellow-feeling for Everest climbers. . ." His condition, as his symptoms were mildly deceptive, was not diagnosed until he was 24, when, on paper, he should have been dead,

although he is able to cite examples of other blue babies who had lived longer. By this time it had become apparent that his condition could only worsen if an operation were not performed—and its success was problematical. So he journeyed from his native Christchurch to Auckland, where, after a somewhat lengthy preparation, he was operated on successfully.

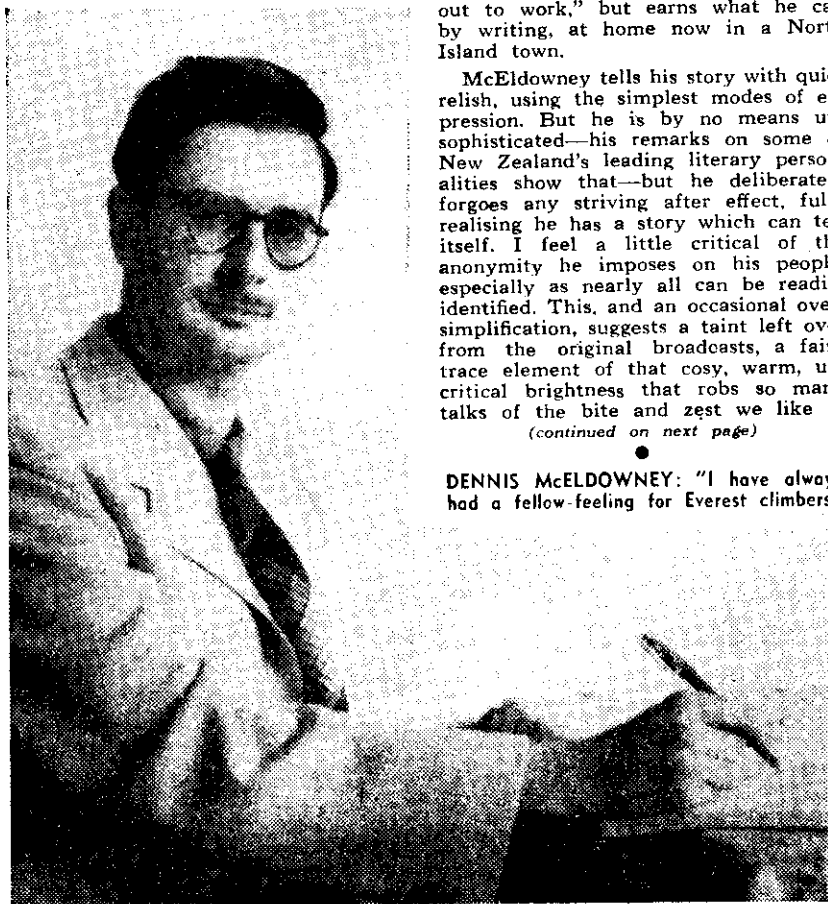
This book, which originated in some broadcasts, is the rich fruit of his new health. He describes his life as an invalid, as a patient in hospital before and after the operation, and the inevitably gradual process by which he regained something approaching a normal life. Dennis McEldowney has a keen eye for the ridiculous and a wit often deliberately blunted by good nature. He records it when an Auckland nurse, chatting brightly, asks, "Are you English—or just Christchurch?" He records of a delightful 16-year-old Maori boy: "The other patients had him teach them rude words in Maori." He records, with a full sense of the pathos of the situation, the decline of a fellow-patient which was coincident with his own post-operation recovery. "The invalid in these days is one of the few remaining exponents of the contemplative life." McEldowney will not readily shake off the habit of contemplation now that the field of his observation has been so immensely extended.

It was not easy to learn to live a normal life, ". . . the main trouble was the sky. The sky was too big. For years I had lived under a ceiling. . ." Snatches of conversation overheard in the street had intense interest for him. Above all, the inter-relationships of human beings were of such an unsuspected, teasing complexity. His life is perhaps not entirely normal today: he does not "go out to work," but earns what he can by writing, at home now in a North Island town.

McEldowney tells his story with quiet relish, using the simplest modes of expression. But he is by no means unsophisticated—his remarks on some of New Zealand's leading literary personalities show that—but he deliberately forgoes any striving after effect, fully realising he has a story which can tell itself. I feel a little critical of the anonymity he imposes on his people, especially as nearly all can be readily identified. This, and an occasional oversimplification, suggests a taint left over from the original broadcasts, a faint trace element of that cosy, warm, uncritical brightness that robs so many talks of the bite and zest we like to

(continued on next page)

DENNIS McELDOWNEY: "I have always had a fellow-feeling for Everest climbers"



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