

NEW ZEALAND LISTENER

INCORPORATING N.Z. RADIO RECORD

Every Friday

Price Threepence

JANUARY 6, 1950

Editorial and Business Offices: 115 Lambton Quay, Wellington, C.I.
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Telegraphic Address: "Listener," Wellington.

Critics are Only Human

ONE of our critics, reviewing a book in this issue, pauses near the end as if brought up sharply by the thought of what he is doing. "I think all written criticisms should be headed One Person's Opinion," he writes. "The written word is so awesome and final." We have taken him at his word, and have attached the heading to his own review. But he has opened an interesting question. It is not easy to be outspoken in a small community, for critics often know the people upon whom they are passing judgment. The victims are perhaps more keenly aware of the notice that is being taken of them than they might be in larger cities, where it is easier to hide. They know that friends and opponents will have read the criticism, and they become uneasily aware of a murmur of discussion which surrounds them until the next excitement invades the coteries. Therefore the tone of criticism tends to be more personal than it should be: protagonists on both sides are concerned with private loyalties as well as with objective standards. Even where little is to be feared from personal motives — as when a radio play, a book or a film produced overseas is reviewed in New Zealand — the opinions expressed are still those of individuals. And although there may be objective standards in art, especially in technical method, the inner life of a book or play will have different values for different people. Critics have prejudices which come from personal experience. Their outlook has been influenced by education, training and private circumstance, and by preferences arising from them, which are not to be found in anyone else. Similarities of outlook are never exact. It is true, of course, that critics who have shown taste and judgment will be more balanced in their opinions, and are more likely to have them confirmed by posterity, than people who are without the experience which allows them to base their judgments on

tested convictions and principles. They will know better than their neighbours why they must praise or reject the work of an artist. But this sort of experience does not make them infallible, and if they are good critics they will know their limitations. They will hesitate to be dogmatic or scornful, and they will strive to be detached, knowing that bad work sinks of its own weight, and that a man who attacks too strongly may sometimes be trying to conceal from himself his own uncertainty, like a person on the edge of conversion who fiercely resists the faith he is about to embrace. It should be realised also that a single critic does not make or break reputations. Michael Joseph, the English publisher, believes that reviews do not promote large sales, that books are successful mainly because people talk about them to their friends. Inexperienced writers may think wildly of suicide when their work is damned. The judgment is fixed coldly in type: nothing short of a convulsion in nature can remove it from the eyes of men. But what does it matter? If a critic's verdict is endorsed by readers, it must be accepted, and the writer must try again. But when it is discovered that critics have different views, and express them passionately, the artist takes comfort and begins to see where he stands. Louis MacNeice summed it up in a recent article in the *New Statesman and Nation*: "According to my reviewers, taken collectively . . . I am a writer they can place quite simply: I am a surprisingly feminine, essentially masculine poet, whose gift is primarily lyrical and basically satirical, swayed by and immune to politics, with and without a religious sense, and I am technically slapdash and technically meticulous . . ." Perhaps, after all, it would be premature for artists to reach for knife and rope when they see in print what somebody thinks of their work. For criticism is after all only the beginning of discussion, and there is room in it for everybody.

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