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BOOKS

In the Vernacular

I SAW IN MY DREAM, by Frank Sargeson; John Lehmann, English price, 10/6.

(Reviewed by David Hall)

SARGESON is a reputation, almost a legend. A new book of his is an important event; it must lead to a revaluing of the reputation, a reassessment of the legend. Does this new book fit the Sargeson of the intellectuals, hailed by an English reviewer as the successor of Katherine Mansfield (a writer he does not resemble), the flattener of all sorts of bourgeois ninepins, the vindicator of nature against the distortions of respectability? Has he still the vitality of *A Man and His Wife*? Yes, he has. But this novel cannot leave his reputation quite where it used to be.

Sargeson has achieved something immensely difficult. He has captured the authentic idiom of his fellow countrymen. They speak for better or worse as New Zealanders, often for worse. The exact and sensitive ear he has brought to this task is something we should value and praise highly. In this novel, whose scene is set vaguely in the 1920's, he uses expressions I haven't heard for years—others I've never heard at all. But I believe in them. But I also believe that both the idiom he creates and his atmosphere emphasise provincial differences as much as they establish a national synthesis. This is Auckland first, then New Zealand.

The novel has a structural defect, a broken back. It begins with our old

friend *When the Wind Blows* reprinted; but in the second edition Henry has become Dave and has changed his nature with his name. Too much has happened in the supposed but never defined interval between parts one and two. Henry is an innocent gull; Dave is experienced and sophisticated. Henry quite literally wishes he had never been born; Dave is an acceptor of things as they are, whether it is the beery good fellowship of the Poruas, the corrosive vulgarity of Mrs. Anderson's friends, or the dreary confidences of the dim-wit farmhand, Johnny. Hero 1 and hero 2 are not adequately joined.

Sargeson would scarcely mind my saying that he does not give a balanced picture of New Zealand society, for that is not his object. This small town with its terrible respectability, this country district with its morons and dunderheads, is Sargeson's dream world, a world in exploring which he occasionally gets his wires crossed with the Kinsey report, a world as grotesque, as unreal, as a Walt Disney cartoon, and in its way just as amusing. We should avoid falling into the error of thinking that, because Sargeson's idiom is realistic, because the fabric of incident in this book, as in his others, is also brilliantly realistic, and because his characters are real people, therefore his general purpose is realism. It seems to be something quite different, an attempt to purge some inner necessity of a nature by no means simple. How far he has moved away from realism into fantasy is shown by the creation of Cedric, the lunatic youth who haunts the fringes of the book and the bush, and Cedric's cave.

The strongest technical interest of Sargeson's work is that the whole of it is subjective. If it is not direct speech, it is reported speech, and both are interrupted by an inner monologue more articulate but by no means any more clearly steered to a visible end. If anything, Sargeson has increased in literary power in this book. He has strength if not sweetness. But why conjure up our country so magnificently and then make it the field of battle for a dream war that must remain private for nearly all of us? The artist is not an entertainer, but he is more of one than he realises. An "integrity" hag-ridden by its own crotchets may be just as unrewarding to the beholder as a "surrender" to a supposed popular taste. But let us rejoice in the shining brilliance of some of the pieces of this mosaic and cease to worry whether the general picture is a fish or a bowl of flowers.

ENCHANTED COAST

KAIKOURA COAST, by W. J. Elvy; the Hundalee Scenic Board, through Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd. Price, 10/6.

If some painstaking settler of the second or third generation were now to

do for each 100-mile stretch of New Zealand coast what Mr. Elvy has done for the Kaikoura coast and the reserves under the control of the Hundalee Scenic Board, some useful and fascinating information would be snatched from a fast-encroaching oblivion. Loving the coast on which he worked as a surveyor and along which he lived for more than 50 years, Mr. Elvy, who is the official secretary of the Scenic Board, set to work to record as much about the history, traditions, and place-names as he could remember or collect from settlers older than himself. He begins his book (disclaiming infallibility) with an outline of the Maori history, the traditional history of the tribes, and the conquests and the raids, with stories of the wily behaviour of Te Rau-paraha, Kekerengu, and others. He devotes the second half of the book, the more fascinating to those fortunate few who have spent their lives in this enchanted area, to accounts of various stories connected with the place-names, from Tirohanga in the north to Hundalee in the south. An appendix shows the composition of the Hundalee Scenic Board and gives an outline of its duties and aims. There are three dozen or so photographs and a map of the coastline with main streams and settlements marked.

Every Coaster will want to own a copy of this book; and every ex-Coaster too. Greenstone treasures will be brought out and stories will be told of camping at the Black Miller, early buggy-trips round treacherous Ohau Point, the hollow ring beneath the wheels (was there an escape tunnel below the road?) round Sandy Bay, the eight-foot octopus, the huge crayfish at Paparua Point; there will be no end to the entertainment for all Coasters and visitors to those streams and bays and rocky points. And some of the stories, such as the one

(continued on next page)



Spencer Digby photograph

FRANK SARGESON
Has he moved away from realism?

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