

NEW ZEALAND LISTENER

INCORPORATING N.Z. RADIO RECORD

Every Friday

Price Threepence

JANUARY 13, 1950

Editorial and Business Offices: 115 Lambton Quay, Wellington, C.I.
G.P.O. Box 1707

Telegraphic Address: "Listener," Wellington.

Telephone 41-470

A New Zealand Writer

JANE MANDER, a New Zealand writer, died a few days before Christmas. She was 72, and she had not published a book since 1928. Although she remained deeply interested in writing, illness kept her inactive during the last years of her life, so that for younger people she was a name associated rather vaguely with an earlier period. Future critics may not give her a high place in our literature, for none of her six novels came within reach of greatness. But it is foolish to look for greatness in the formative years of writing. Even a competent novel is a sort of miracle when it comes, unannounced and lonely, to a country with a weak literary tradition. *The Story of a New Zealand River* was published in 1920. Thirty years ago Katherine Mansfield was still writing; but her influence was felt more strongly in England than in New Zealand, and a Dominion novelist had few models apart from William Satchell and Edith Grossman. Jane Mander's novels had faults of the period: they lacked the classic virtues of restraint and balance, and the situations or plots were sometimes artificial. Nevertheless, they belonged to New Zealand. The timber workers, small-town storekeepers and politicians were native sons, and they moved across landscapes which are found in only one small part of the world. Jane Mander's father was born at Onehunga in 1849, so that the lives of father and daughter almost covered our history. The novelist used to say that the land was in her bones; but like most writers who have done good work for New Zealand she had to go abroad and come home with wider knowledge and experience before she could look about her with the selective eye of the artist. Her travels left her with the divided mind which was a feature of our literary temperament from Katherine Mansfield to D'Arcy Cresswell, and perhaps beyond. The dilemma is familiar to students of

our literature. It drew Jane Mander to London, and kept her there in her most productive years; and although she wrote one of her New Zealand novels while she was in England, she turned presently to other themes and backgrounds, and her work as a writer was almost done. Her style was vigorous: she moved through her pages with something of the free and purposeful stride she used for walking. She liked to say what was in her mind, and her feet were firmly on the ground. Her earlier novels can still be read for their own sake; and if they seem now to have weaknesses which date them, it must be remembered that she helped to break down artificial modes of writing and to clear the way for younger writers who were to make the New Zealand scene and idiom more recognisably our own. E. H. McCormick has pointed out that her novels had a "documentary" value: she found her backgrounds in rural industries and occupations, and she did more than any of her predecessors to bring our social environment into fiction. Further, she brushed aside restraints which had given a lady-like tone to much of our writing. She was a pioneer, and it is only by seeing her books against the bareness of the early nineteenth-century that we can find the measure of her achievement. She did her work under difficulties, artistic and personal. In her later years she still spoke of the novel she hoped to write; but she had to make sacrifices, and her plans became little more than dreams as her health began to fail. And indeed, she had done enough. Jane Mander can never be treated lightly by people who want to understand the growth of our literature. She was a good friend, unfailingly sympathetic to younger writers. Those who knew her will remember gratefully and affectionately the "something fresh and sturdy" which came to her novels from a large and generous nature.

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