

POET'S PROGRESS REPORT

... An Interview with D'Arcy Cresswell

NOW the voyage to England with which this story begins was the second on which I had embarked from New Zealand, for I had left there a few months before war began, when I was seventeen, to equip myself in a prosperous profession, a course quite alien to my natural tastes, and one from which the war offered me a fortunate escape. And all this time I wrote poems of different sorts, but of no merit, I am sure.

SO begins the first volume of the autobiography of Walter D'Arcy Cresswell, the strange, eccentric character who is without doubt the most romantic living figure in New Zealand letters. That first volume was ambitiously called *The Poet's Progress*, and was published in 1930. Nine years later it was followed by a second, larger, and more self-assured volume, *Present Without Leave*. With the passage of another decade, and from rumours that the poet was still labouring assiduously in London, it was not surprising to learn the other day that a third volume is on the way to completion. What was surprising was that the news should be brought by the author himself, when he walked almost unannounced into *The Listener* office after another of those restless voyages (by cargo vessel) back to "this my Country, hateful on all sides," as he describes it in one of his poems.

The romantic figure of his own, self-created legend had aged somewhat from the familiar portraits by William Rothenstein and Barns Graham. The once-challenging and youthful features showed some signs of the lifetime of poverty and insecurity that had been deliberately entered upon as a part of the poet's vocation. Yet there was money in his pocket and he was respectably dressed, while the old motor-cycling cap had been replaced by an ordinary brown felt. He carried a walking-stick and moved with just the slightest suspicion of a limp.

And as he talked there emerged a personality that seemed the exact complement of his own writings, which was, like his curious literary style, cultivated, egotistical, mannered and slightly flamboyant on first impressions, yet with beneath it an attractive simplicity of character, a fundamental innocence that could admit of no compromise when it came to his own old-fashioned ideals regarding the poet's function and place in society. One felt that there was no basic difference between this man in his middle fifties and the youthful poet who wrote, 21 years ago, in London:

Dear books, be all the nourishment I need!
I am so poor, I scarce have means to buy
One meal a day. Alas! I must rely
On your fair thoughts for all my winter feed.

AT THE BBC

HE explained that this was his first visit to New Zealand for 12 years, and that during the war he had been engaged most of the time in what he described as "war work."

"At the outbreak of war I took a job at the BBC (where I worked, inci-

dentally, under Ormond Wilson (broadcasting New Zealand Government news to the troops in the Middle East during 1941-42. After that I joined the Ministry of Information, and lectured to the army—that went down rather well. Then I was asked to lecture on New Zealand to them; and that went down very well indeed. I have always hoped since that you owe some of your influx of ex-soldiers to my lectures, for I painted the country in glowing colours.

"All my literary work came to a standstill during this time, as it did with all of us, and I had to put the play I had been working on, *The Forest*, in cool storage. Since the war I have finished it and am continuing with my other literary work. The memoir I completed last year on Margaret MacMillan has been my only published work since *Present Without Leave*, although *The Forest* is being considered for production by a private theatre, as it is not suitable for various reasons for commercial production."

"From your earlier books one gathers that although you were sympathetically attracted to New Zealand, you had to go to England to write?"

"It wasn't so much a matter of having to go to England to write as having to go to England to live. When I came back here once I was left on the beach. An axe was put in my hand, and I was told to go into the scrub and cut trees! If I've got to die in poverty I'd rather



EDITH SITWELL

"A modern Cassandra, prophesying doom"



Spencer Digby photograph

D'ARCY CRESSWELL

do it in London than on the steps of Parliament Buildings in Wellington."

STATE AID

"WHAT do you think of our State Literary Fund?"

"I think a literary fund is a splendid idea in principle, but I also think there could be some improvement in your methods of distribution of it. I understand the fund is not for assisting authors in difficulties but for bringing out publications."

"You think there should be a fund for authors?"

"Rather the latter than the former. After all, if you want to bring out books why not have subsidies for publishers? And certainly it would be unthinkable (to mention another matter) for an author in England to apply to a fund for assistance and for this to be then published in the daily papers.

"I think the writing being done in New Zealand at the present time, which I keep in touch with as far as possible, is about as good as that being done anywhere else, although you still seem to be too open to fashionable influences. Nothing much of importance is happening in England, and there is no verse coming out there at the present time that is better, in my opinion, than the verse you see in, say, *Landfall*. Although I would make an exception there in the case of Edith Sitwell's recent work, which I think is remarkable."

"You don't think we are ten years behind England, as has often been said?"

"No. I think on the contrary that out here you are only too close to current

movements in England. I realise now that when I was on the beach here I might have learnt all about modern deplorable tendencies in English verse from the publications of the Caxton Press and not been so startled by the discovery when I got to England."

Cresswell has always cultivated a deliberately archaic style, both in his prose and in his poetry. And just as deliberately he has kept himself aloof from modern trends in letters, writing his verse in strictly classical forms, and the volumes of his autobiography in a style that might have come out of the 17th Century.

Let not fashion be my guide,
Nor quick fame, that maketh pride;
Hath earth's hidden power of me
No slow need, I'll nothing be,

he said in one of his earliest sonnets, written in England in the 'twenties. So it is not surprising that this aloofness from the contemporary scene should enable him to see his fellow-writers in a different light from that of most of his contemporaries, and make his critical opinions of more than passing interest. Thus it was interesting that he should mention in the course of conversation that he considered Basil Dowling to be New Zealand's most promising poet. And this is what he has to say about the English scene.

A FIG FOR T. S. ELIOT

"T. S. ELIOT is, I think, a man without the slightest creative spark, and now his influence is, of course, very much on the wane. The most promising young English poet is, in my opinion, Andrew Young, who has written two volumes, *The Green Man* and *A Prospect of Flowers*. He is a lyrical poet who writes in a quiet, 17th Century vein, which is, I think, so much above the style of the much lauded and fashionable poets of the Auden and Eliot school—although they, as I say, are being superseded. To my mind, the most interesting thing happening in England just now is the development of Edith Sitwell, who has become a sort of modern Cassandra, prophesying the doom of the modern world. The effects of the war which she saw about her seem to have awakened her to real emotions of pity and horror."

Finally we asked him about his autobiography, about the way he wrote it, and how long he thought he would continue it. As to the method, he said that in the case of each volume he had first to write a good deal of poetry so as to justify the prose narrative. Thus, he said, he had been writing poetry over the past two years—a preliminary to the third volume of autobiography he was now engaged on—although, like his play, this poetry was as yet unpublished. "And I should never write a fourth volume without carrying the poetry further," he added.

As to the length of time he would continue with it, he said: "Sometimes I like to imagine myself living on, at the age of about 100, and working away in my second childhood, somewhere on a mountain in New Zealand, on volume five."

(Several chapters from the unpublished third volume of Mr. Cresswell's autobiography will shortly be printed in *The Listener*.)

—P.J.W.