

WRITERS IN CONFERENCE

AN interesting thesis awaits the handling by any student concerned with human motivation. The secretary of the Writers' Conference in Christchurch might be persuaded to make available the vast correspondence conducted at ever-increasing tempo during the months preceding this unique event. Some came dubiously, some condescendingly, some triumphantly, some belligerently, some with appalling enthusiasm. We are concerned here only with observing that they did come.

Indeed, the strength in which they arrived, whether by stratospheric clean-shaven descent upon Harewood, or tramping doggedly out of the foothills under a burden of knapsack and whisks, the strength of their numbers gave rise very soon to two considerations.

First, people began to wonder about the absentees. They were so few that they took on a prominence that their presence could hardly have exceeded. One heard regret at the absence of Rex and Bob more frequently expressed than gratification at the presence of Allen and Frank. The use of Christian names suggested constantly that there was a greater liaison among our writers than the geography of the country ("four centres held together by railway lines") and the conviction of some speakers would lead one to expect.

Even in the more formal atmosphere of the conference rooms Christian names sometimes replaced "Mr. Chairman" and "The Last Speaker." Often this insistence on Christian names had the ring of refutation, perhaps of unease—refutation of bourgeois etiquette associated with public discussion, unease felt by so many intelligent New Zealanders under the disciplines of any conventions.

Secondly, the feeling was conceived in misgiving and parturient in horror that there were too many writers at this conference. Why, asked Charity Sweetword, whose rhapsodies on Eventide in April and the wonder of this wonderful world brought such octosyllabic comfort to readers of her little weekly column, why had they let in those wild young men with Adam's apples shuttling in wrath, who barely contained themselves on the wooden benches.



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strenuous programme—three concerts in as many days—in Christchurch next week. At the first, on Tuesday, May 29 (to be broadcast by 3YC at 8.0 p.m.) the major work will be the Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, by Brahms. There will be two works by Mozart, the overture to *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. Other items are Elgar's *Cockaigne* Overture and *Bohéro*, by Ravel.

A varied programme has been arranged for the lunch-hour concert in the Civic Theatre, to be broadcast by 3YC at 12.15 p.m. on Wednesday, May 30. Opening with Nicolai's *Merry Wives of Windsor*, it will include Mozart's

Why, asked the sturdy journalist for whom words were words, a good yarn was a good yarn, and clean fun never did anybody any harm, why this mystification about the author's function in society, these disquisitions on the relationship between writer and reader. "If the public wants sausages it is the business of the purveyor to get the sausages to them. The writer is a purveyor. Let him deliver the goods and the public will buy them."

PRESENTLY these bewilderments were sifted away. After the first day's sessions it was felt that at least four conferences should have been held simultaneously so that Charity could have knitted comfortably in one place in the company of other daffodil-watchers, old Ted could have doddered over the anecdotes and personalities of Boer War days in another place, and so on. But the unswerving momentum of the programme itself either shook off or dragged in the misfits.

As the sessions went on, and the chairmen grew more ruthless and vigilant, things began to take a direction. At the beginning it was very apparent that in the words of Vance Palmer, everybody was desperately unconcerned with everybody else's writing and views on writing. No sooner had the principals resumed their seats than there was always a simultaneous eruption of people to their feet all over the room. They had come with something (or perhaps nothing) to say and were going to say it in public. Any possible cohesion of thought was exploded under the vehemence, the reminiscence, the benevolence, the chagrin, as speaker succeeded speaker, rocketing away on a hobby-horse and always reluctantly letting somebody else have the air-lanes.

But if direction was achieved in time for the conference to have been rewarding it must be observed that white dots began to appear down the centre of the road it took, which steadily developed to a white line and then to a veritable picket fence. And on each side marched a generation, or perhaps a generation and a half. Any irritation at carbuncular personalities was forgotten under the more serious sense of wholesale breach. The sense of it had such a tautness that irrelevant impingements

Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, Massenet's *Le Dernier Sommeil de la Vierge*, the *Romeo and Juliet* Overture by Tchaikovsky, Dance and Polka from the *Age of Gold* Ballet Suite, by Shostakovich, and *Tales from the Vienna Woods*, by Johann Strauss.

The Christchurch pianist Ernest Jenner will play Bach's Piano Concerto in D Minor with the orchestra at the final concert on Thursday, May 31. The symphony on this programme is Tchaikovsky's Fifth, in E Minor. Works by Wagner (*The Meistersinger* Overture) and Debussy (*L'Après-midi d'un faune*) will also be played. This concert will be broadcast by 3YC at 8.0 p.m.

fell into the discussion like words in square brackets and the minds of the majority leapt across them unheeding.

SINCE the conference is still going on as I write, and since a lapse of time would be required to gauge the whole implications it is perhaps risky to generalise now. At the moment it may be said that the young generation, especially the younger young generation, have not only read the works of the older generation, but have accorded them respect and gratitude. This remains true despite the heat, even, violence, of the younger writers' retorts, accusations and expressions of distrust. The men with shock hair adopted shock tactics, even shocking tactics. But they understood the place and purport of their elders' creative and critical works.

On the other hand the old generation, and not necessarily the older old, have often not read the works of the younger generation, and where they have, have too frequently failed to credit them with any worth, far less be grateful for them. Even the smiling tolerance of many of the old guard has been felt insufficiently reassuring to the young writers. Oddly enough, the more fundamental lack of sympathy expressed by the older writers was usually couched in more courteous, even kindly terms.

This matter is of such significance that nothing can be said upon it here. But not to have mentioned its emergence would have been to scamp one's impressions of this conference. The issues and the people concerned in this need to be particularised, and there is no doubt that they will be.

THERE is likely also to be more heard of many of the contributions by speakers during the last four days. One of the most valuable and delightful was the paper read by James K. Baxter on recent trends in New Zealand poetry. Indeed, it seems so certain that what he had to say will not only be heard over the air, but also appear in print that one need only at this time cherish the occasion of its original presentation—the calm lucid utterance, the ingenuous pause for appreciation, the fluent tact of the reading of illustrative poems will be associated by those who heard him with any future reading of his words.

This association of a personality with the utterance is perhaps the greatest pleasure that the conference has been able to give. To read a novel by Vance Palmer will be an experience enhanced now by the recollection of a man who looks and sounds fully seasoned. His written words will tend to take on the



VANCE PALMER
A tranquil, twilight voice

slow and easy cadence of his voice, which is a sort of twilight voice, brown and tranquil, a harvest voice of ripeness without richness. His person, too, is of this quality, full without expansiveness. He carries with him the tidiness of work done, hands washed, the boards scrubbed down, ready tomorrow for work which will come familiarly under the tools. Vance Palmer at the conference seemed to symbolise leisure after the day's heat and the relished meal.

IT has been worth listening to. People came here presumably to get something and most of them gave something away. They came to find answers to problems and if they carry anything away it may simply be the hollow comfort that the chief difficulty is merely to write. They may have discovered that every country is in search of itself, that every writer is hungry for readers, that nobody is ever paid sufficiently for what he writes.

But it is probable that more will come of it than this. Subjects have been raised which are unlikely to be left alone. More will be heard concerning the State Literary Fund to cite a more mundane example. More direct interest will be shown in the survival of the Little Reviews. More may well come of Johannes Andersen's talk and Frank Sargeson's comment upon it. Criticism may modify its methods. Verse-making can only be the better for what James Baxter had to say.

If there were too many writers at the conference that was unavoidable in the circumstances. If the conference unfortunately took up much of the time during which it was held, that, too, was inevitable. Above everything, there was possible to a greater degree than ever before a social intercourse among writers which has been as stimulating as it has been delightful.

—Augustus