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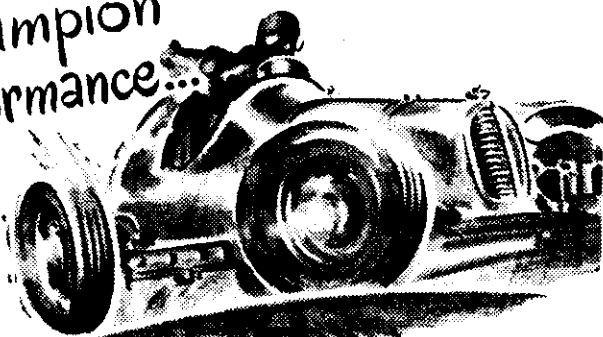
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Books

ARGUMENT of POETRY

NEW ZEALAND POETRY YEARBOOK,
Volume One, edited by Louis Johnson; A.
H. and A. W. Reed, Wellington; 10/6.

(Reviewed by M.H.H.)

NOTHING but approval can be given to the purpose of this collection, and in general to the way in which it has been carried out. Poets in New Zealand are very active; but they still have inadequate opportunities for publication, though they are doing much better than in the past; and a platform once a year should be an encouragement. Perhaps it was wise to give the first issue a solid weighting of established names. Nearly all the best-known poets are here (a notable absentee is A. R. D. Fairburn), and even the younger names are becoming familiar. It will be interesting to see in later issues what part the collection can play in the discovery of new talent.

Louis Johnson has announced his intention of setting aside space every year for a closer inspection of four or five poets. In this issue the task of critical appraisal is given to Erik Schwimmer. At the end of a brief discussion of W. H. Oliver's work he declares: "These are all developments which are new to New Zealand poetry." It is not clear what exactly are meant to be the new developments. The only hint of change in the section which precedes the statement is a comment on the treatment of locality. "Rather than specific references, one finds an effort to efface the special marks of landscape, ending up with synthesised images in the same way as painters like Woollaston." But is there anything new in this? Has Mr. Schwimmer never read the poetry of R. A. K. Mason?

"There is no doubt," Mr. Schwimmer goes on, "that the Curnow generation has done much to make such developments possible, but it should now be recognised that the period of preoccupation with the specific New Zealand experience is past." Since the "developments" have nowhere been stated clearly, it is impossible to discuss them. And the admonition in the second part of the sentence quoted need not be regarded as anything more than a personal opinion, unsupported by argument. It is an opinion which seems to come from a very limited conception of the functions of poetry. English poets have been preoccupied with "specific" English experience for a long time; and in spite of changes in method and taste, and the search for truth and beauty which has taken them from an early simplicity of diction to a complex use of suggestion and allusion, their Englishness remains an underlying unity. New Zealand is a young country; it is absurd to suggest that, because the landscapes of these islands have been faintly disclosed by a few poets, they are now sufficiently described and dwelt upon, and that the new poets may feel themselves free to think of something else.

Fortunately, there is evidence in this volume that younger poets have no intention of cutting themselves off from the land and the people. Their best work has a recognisable colouring. In Alastair Campbell's "The Rock Spring" and Ruth Dallas's "Man from the Hills"

the indications of locality are as clear as in the poems of Allen Curnow and Charles Brasch. Even W. H. Oliver, put forward as an exemplar of the new school, writes unmistakably of New Zealand. Why should he do otherwise? This is where he lives; and it is through the immediate and local that a poet expresses what is distant and universal.

New Zealand poets are now working in a wider range than formerly, but it is doubtful if—with the possible exception of Charles Spear, who indulges a cultivated taste—they are attempting anything new. In my opinion the most interesting poem in the whole collection is Allen Curnow's "The Changeling." And according to Mr. Schwimmer it would now be proper to deflate Mr. Curnow to an ancestral role. The simple truth, however, is that there are no recognisable "schools"; the connection between Allen Curnow and James Baxter, Charles Brasch and Hubert Witheford, is logical and clear—an extension of method and theme, by no means a rejection and a new beginning. Poems of ideas have been written for many years: the philosophical note was sounded by R. A. K. Mason, Allen Curnow, A. R. D. Fairburn, Arnold Wall, J. R. Hervey, Basil Dowling and Charles Brasch long before the horizons of poetry in this country opened upon the gaze of Mr. Schwimmer. If this critic is really a spokesman for younger groups, it is time someone mentioned the need of a little humility. The assumption that only a handful of young poets now have anything important to say, and that the main function of Curnow, Glover and the rest has been to prepare the way for them, is sheer arrogance.

It is a pity that in this first number of the Yearbook the voice of a coterie (and a sterile one at that) should be heard. Mr. Johnson explains in his introduction: "Real criticism cannot exist if editors choose only those points of view they favour, and here the aim will be simply to provide a place for discussion." The sentiments are admirable, but it is difficult to see what discussion can take place in a volume which comes out once a year. And if it be said that the discussion will be elsewhere, the answer must be that critical essays printed in the Yearbook are on permanent record, and that they cannot fail to colour readers' impressions of the volume as a whole. The impression taken from Volume One is rather different from what it should be in a collection of poems intended to be widely representative.

THE FAR SOUTH

WILD LIFE IN THE SUBANTARCTIC, by
J. H. Sorensen; Whitcombe and Tombs;
12/6.

MANY Listener readers will know much of the material in Mr. Sorensen's book, for most of it appeared as articles in this journal in 1946. Those who read them then will be glad to have them in book form, with some additional material, including comment on recent newspaper articles about Campbell Island tragedies and a very useful background chapter describing the subantarctic islands and giving a brief account of their discovery. Those who haven't read them before (whether specially interested in wild life or not) will find in them all the appeal of the

N.Z. LISTENER, DECEMBER 21, 1951.