

The Australian Tradition

AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE, by H. M. Green; Melbourne University Press; 2 6.

(Reviewed by A. R. D. Fairburn)

THIS book was written by Mr. Green at the request of the Trustees of the Public Library of Victoria, who, "desiring to mark the first half century of the Commonwealth of Australia, felt that the best contribution they could make to this historic occasion was to publish a Guide to Australian Literature since 1900." It contains a useful 16-page bibliography of ballad verse and poetry, short stories, novels, drama, essays in many fields, magazines and newspapers, and works of general reference. It is preceded by a 38-page essay giving a condensed account of the rise of Australian literature.

"Almost all that is distinctive and by far the most that really matters in Australian literature," Mr. Green begins by saying, "belong to the half-century that is now ending; broadly speaking, that is, for it was with the later nineties that the period actually began. Before that there had been a few forerunners, but they had been isolated, in a society in which a national literature would have been impossible because national characteristics, national unity, and a national

consciousness had not as yet been attained." Here we have Mr. Green's major assumption, which is not seriously modified in what follows. He speaks throughout as if "national characteristics, national unity, and a national consciousness" had been attained. An outsider may grant the national characteristics; but may he be forgiven for remarking on the curious texture of the Australian literary tradition, and for questioning whether it has in fact reached the degree of maturity Mr. Green seems to imply?

I have for some time had a strong impression (which Mr. Green's essay has done nothing to dispel) that the dominant motive in Australian literature, from almost the very beginning, has been a feverish pursuit of the "national unity and national consciousness" of which he speaks with such assurance; and that a too great willingness to exhaust body and spirit in the chase has led to distort-

tions and compromises that are possibly less apparent to Australians than to outsiders.

As in the early development of American literature, the attempts to attain consciousness have been of two kinds—those based on the importation of an intellectual fashion from Europe, and those attempting to exploit strictly local forms of life. Action and reaction have in this case been violent. The latest manifestation of this literary schizophrenia is seen in the emergence of the "Jindyworobaks" and the "Angry Penguins": on the one hand a despairing attempt to get right back to aboriginal beginnings, and on the other a misguided effort to be more Parisian than Paris. The Jindyworobak impulse is perhaps the most genuine and understandable that has arisen for many decades; but it, no less than the other, is evidence of that unease of the spirit, and the extreme self-consciousness arising from it, which are so strongly characteristic of the Australian tradition. One finds a parallel at an earlier time, when imported

fauns and dryads inhabited the same earth as the sunburnt stockmen. If C. J. Brennan is Australia's most significant poet, it is perhaps because he managed to contain the explosive mixture within his mind!

The rise of Australian literature at the turn of the century was, Mr. Green says, "stimulated by the renaissance, as distinguished from the decadence, of the English 'Nineties,' and organised and guided by the Sydney *Bulletin*." In what follows, Mr. Green shows that he is not completely unaware of the limitations of the *Bulletin*, but I think he gives it credit for too much. On the whole it has exercised a distorting influence. In earlier days especially it did its best to nip in the bud any impulses towards self-criticism that may have been latent in the Australian mind. The best writers of this century have succeeded in spite of it, not because of it.

The self-consciousness to which I have referred has, I think, two main causes. One is a sense of inferiority. C. J. Dennis, says Mr. Green, "based on the recently-discovered larrikin a sentimental and extremely amusing extravaganza that was enormously popular in its day." The glorification of local characteristics because they are local, and not because they are admirable, is found in even more aggressive form in certain other writers. (New Zealand has, perhaps, been passing through a similar, though less intense, crisis in recent years.) The other cause of mental unease is the urban-rural split, which



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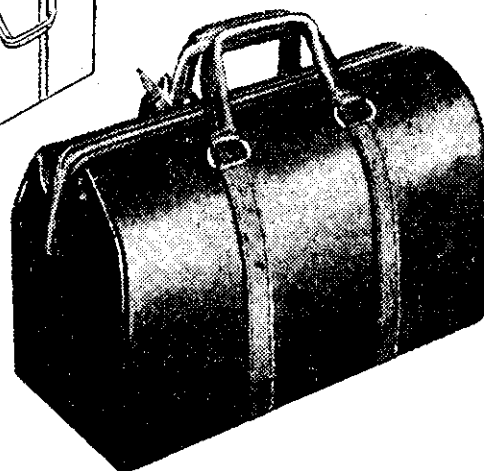
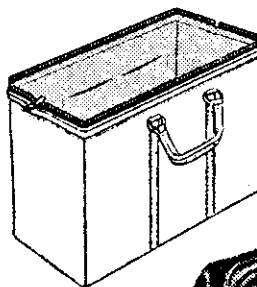
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