

The Writer as Outcast

by IAN A. GORDON

If the writer breaks with society and departs into the Wilderness in customary Romantic style, then he loses brotherhood with all but similar outcasts. What Justice demands is something more difficult—that he should remain as a cell of good living in a corrupt society, and in this situation by writing and example attempt to change it.

—James Baxter, "Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry."

More continuously in contact with the social nondescripts and misfits for whose company I have always had a strong predilection.

—Frank Sargeson, Autobiographical notes in "New Zealand New Writing."

I CHOSE these two quotations to illustrate a point of view that to me is disturbingly prevalent in writers in this country. I deliberately chose them from two writers whom any serious critic must regard as two of our best. By that I do not mean two of the best of a bad lot. I mean two writers of quality and distinction.

It might be argued that quality and distinction are enough. But the fault of wilful exclusiveness and deliberate restrictions of his horizon has to my mind arrested the development of the now middle-aged Sargeson; and the younger man Baxter may find in a few years that an intellectual cell, even though it bear the self-inscribed name-plate "Good-Living," is a very lonely place, of which a corrupt society (inhabiting "Number 34, Main Street, Suburbia") is blithely unaware. It is faintly disturbing to find Baxter, in the paper I have quoted, insisting that the true writer must be a prophet, and echoing, almost to the very words, the "Woe to the bloody city!" of that depressing Biblical character, Ezekiel.

There is a Myth of New Zealand Society which the writer in our midst

clings to as tenaciously as the primitive savage does to his tribal legends. The Myth runs something like this: The Writer is an endowed creature, not like other men, to whom society owes a reasonable living. The Writer must make this reasonable living by Writing. Society, in which he will make his reasonable living by Writing, is very wicked and must be castigated freely with prophecies of doom. The symbol of the wicked society is in Dunedin the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, in Christchurch the Bishop, in Wellington the Public Servant and the Minister of Education, in Auckland the Big Business Man. Elsewhere in New Zealand he is the Sheep Farmer, if available; if not the Cow Cocky will do at a pinch—after all, he usually runs a few sheep these days. The Writer would not be seen dead in the company of the Wicked, who often (oddly enough not always) retaliate by not buying his books. Thus the Writer is forced to degrade himself, for he is growing up and not unnaturally wants to get married, by accepting employment from the Public Service or the Education Board or even (the shame of it!) from Big Business. By this time younger Writers have already begun on a fresh cycle and begin to regard their degraded fellow as a lost leader.

What—in all seriousness—is a writer? He writes; by definition. But beyond that? To me a good writer (I am not concerned with the bad ones) is a man (or woman) who brings to writing an individual vision or point of view, and who writes about something. Too many New Zealand writers have only the in-

dividual vision. When they turn for material to write about, for the grist for their mill, they have nothing. Or rather they have something. They have themselves, their present struggles, their adolescent loves, their memories of unhappy and thwarted childhoods. Ah, these childhoods! Childhood in the Wai-kato in *When the Wind Blows*, childhood in Wellington in *The Huntsman in His Career*, childhood in Invercargill in *Roads from Home*, childhoods in both Islands in *The Listener* and in the stream of unpublished manuscripts that I con- month by month with unconquerable hope. I have read childhoods written by students, childhoods by mature men and women, childhoods (many of them) written by middle-aged women whose families are off their hands and who have leisure (Heaven knows how they find it these days) to write at last the New Zealand novel — on their childhood.

I am sure the Myth is the reason for this kindergarten of childhoods. One cannot write of a corrupt and wicked society. But there is always the uncorrupted and innocent self, lingering as a memory crying out to be recalled. I do not see us having an adult New Zealand literature until writers abandon the Myth, that slick and unexamined formula, and have a look at New Zealand as it is. At the present moment too many of them are outcasts, and outcasts from personal choice. Not many of them go the whole length of living the hermit life in the solitary bach. The majority are content with a kind of intellectual

isolationism which Baxter envisages so clearly in the passage quoted. But to me the writer who accepts a job in the ordinary world while he nourishes in secret the consciousness of his own superiority has made himself as much an outcast as the writer who takes to the bush.

If we put aside for the moment writings of the Ezekiels and the Blakes and the Shelleys (who are in the long run a very specialised type) the material for literature has always been people—other people. A poet can for a few years exist on himself and his own immediate experience. But the prose writer—and especially the writer of short stories and the novelist—exhausts the interest of his own introspections in a very short space of time. What makes the achievement of the English novel so solid is not that from thinly-veiled autobiographies we can reconstruct the lives of novelists, but that in the pages of Fielding and Jane Austen and Dickens and James Joyce and Virginia Woolf we find the people of the author's time magnificently portrayed

and sensitively understood. You don't understand people by running away from them. But having understood, you gain the right to criticise their way of living and even, if you care, to prophesy. There is in the English novel plenty of adverse commentary on the way in which people organise their lives. It is commentary based on knowledge, written by writers who have lived in, and not on the fringe of, the society to which they belong. Fielding was a busy magistrate, Dickens a shorthand-reporter, Trollope a post-office official; and it may horrify the local writer-outcast to know that one of England's most sensitive present-day novelists is (whisper it) a Big Business Man, a company-director, no less.

The solution? The solution as I see it is simple. Write about what you know. Preserve, as something precious, your individual vision. It is yours. We need it. But knowledge of people comes from outside. If your experience is limited, expand it. But while it is limited, stay inside it. Jane Austen was able to make a whole world out of a few families in a small village, writing her novels in the drawing room while somebody played the piano and a host of small noisy children played on the floor. So far as I am aware she made no application to either public or private sources for a few quiet months in which to finish her work in progress. Here in New Zealand things are different, as writers know. A few weeks overtime on the wharf or in the woolstore have provided not a few writers with months of time in which to write. The New Zealand Literary Fund has on a few occasions done likewise. Everything seems to be there—the leisure to write, the country villages, the few families. But where is the New Zealand Jane Austen?

I suspect that she (or he—for she might be a he) instead of getting on with the job is at this very moment wasting time writing in self-satisfied exile a diatribe against the Philistines.



(Solution to No. 587)

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Clues Across

- Exclude anger for curtain-fire.
- I ask for an author's nom-de-plume.
- A gnawing form of 2 down.
- Reversal of fate gives rise to a particular frame of mind.
- They may be drawn, but not necessarily by an artist.
- A fair one may nevertheless be made by a dark one.
- Intent ode sometimes suffered by erring schoolboys.
- A sound confused in Africa?
- The bottom of a frock after a month becomes an assault of which the punishment was originally "a limb for a limb."
- He does all the talking.
- Noise at the beginning of a meal.

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

- "But beauty vanishes, beauty passes, However —, — it be" ("Epitaph" by Walter De La Mare).
- You're reading one now.
- Jill has lost her head here, and is naturally not well.
- You need yours about you.
- Convinced.

- "Nods, and Becks, and wreathed —" ("L'Allegro," Milton).
- "Go therefore now, and work; for there shall no — be given you, yet shall ye deliver the tale of 8 down" (Exodus, Chapter 5).
- Bird in a horrible muddle.
- If it's thin, you're in!

Clues Down

- "Nature I loved, and, next to Nature, —" (Walter Savage Landor).
- Queer spirit?
- Play by 7 down.
- Boils head? This should be done away with!
- He also wrote "An Enemy of the People."
- See 20 down.
- Suffering (2 words).
- Disney's dog and a broken cart provide for a rich man.
- I'm dead, so I wear this instead of a halo?
- "At last he rose, and twitch'd his — blue" ("Lycidas," Milton).

No. 588 (Constructed by R.W.C.)

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