

# The Classical Background

CLASSICAL INFLUENCES ON ENGLISH POETRY, by J. A. K. Thomson; Allen and Unwin. English price, 15/.

(Reviewed by Ian A. Gordon)

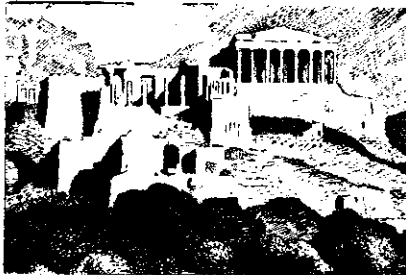
TO write a first-rate book on the classical background of English literature demands an intimate knowledge of three literatures, Greek, Roman and English; and unless the author has a reasonable knowledge of the literature of France and Italy in addition, his conclusions are often invalid. This is a tall order, perhaps almost impossible. The author of this volume retired some years ago from a chair of classics, and this is now his second book on his theme.

Thomson is best when he is comparing the great classics with an author in English where the influence is obvious and well established. The first third of the book on the classical epic and on Milton is excellent. The ground has been well-trodden before, but that does not detract from his clear exposition of the development of a great form of poetry from Homer through Virgil to Milton. The reader not versed in Latin and Greek will emerge from these pages with a fuller appreciation both of

the classics and of Milton's classical epic. But when Thomson writes on authors where the classical influence has not in the past been so completely recognised, his handling of his material is less firm.

The author of this kind of book has to be a double expert. Thomson is a professional on the classical side; his knowledge of English literature is amateur and incomplete. The chapter on didactic poetry will make any serious student of our 18th Century literature wish to rush in to fill the gaps. The author brushes aside 18th Century didactic poems with a casual "one remembers now little more than their names." Who is the "one" in that sentence? Certainly no

one doing an honours course on the period. When he says in the same page that in Thomson's *Seasons* there may be little or no direct influence of Virgil's *Georgics*, "one" (in this case the reviewer) wonders if he has opened the pages of



James Thomson. The *Georgics* of Virgil was in the 18th and early 19th Century the most influential single classic.

Similarly, in the chapter on comedy he misses many things of importance, which need to be said in a book of this kind. There is no mention of the fact that Shakespeare's Falstaff is based eventually on a classical model, the braggart warrior or  *miles gloriosus* of Plautus. On tragedy the author has useful comments on the influence of Seneca, but space should have been found for a fuller discussion of the Elizabethan tragedy of revenge, which is more Senecan than the book suggests. And what of the five-act structure of Elizabethan drama? Why not three as in modern drama? Again the author misses an important connection between the classical and the English form. Now and again there are statements of fact that will not stand a moment's scrutiny.

Chaucer, we are told, "is not in any recognisable way affected by Juvenal." This review is not the place to tell of that Latin satirist's profound influence on a whole genre of medieval writing, which includes works so diverse as Chaucer's

*Canterbury Tales* and his *Prologue to the Legend of Good Women*. The author at this point simply does not know enough of Chaucer to make a judgment.

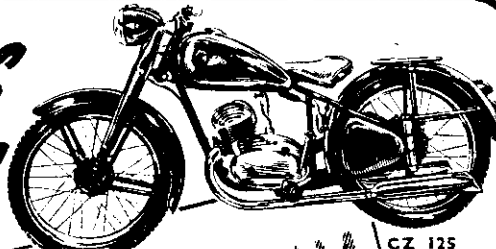
Perhaps I am being unduly pedantic on a book that is designed mainly for the general and not the academic reader. The professional student of English must accept some of his judgments and of his facts with caution. But it is fair to say that the general picture of the classical influence on English poetry is right, and the reader (and he is in the majority) whose sampling of English poetry is confined to a few of the major writers will find this volume an illuminating background book on the theme.

## SOUTHERN PIONEERS

SQUATTER AND SETTLER IN THE WAIPARA COUNTY, by Douglas Cresswell; published for the Waipara County Council by the Pegasus Press, Limited, Christchurch; 22/6.

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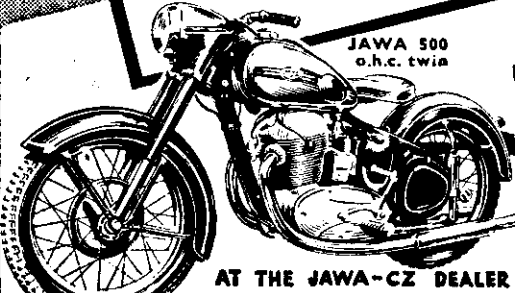


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