

From a banker's diary

Wednesday: Mr. [REDACTED] will shortly be making another business trip throughout New Zealand. He asked me to put him in touch with some of our managers.



A banker is a good man to know

Mr. [REDACTED] is a customer of my branch, but his business takes him to many parts of New Zealand. So when he travels he arranges for introductions from me to our branch managers in the places he will visit. He finds it useful to have someone in each place to whom he can turn for information on local business conditions. As he says—to be a customer of the "Wales" is to have friends all over New Zealand.

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Laurels Slightly Faded

THE poets laureate of England, whose lives and work are examined in a series of programmes prepared by Professor J. Y. T. Greig (see page 9), are a strangely mixed company. A poet of high reputation might today think twice about joining them. True greatness, of course, could survive the test. Nobody thinks less of Dryden, Wordsworth and Tennyson because they share the succession with Shadwell, Tate, Colley Cibber and Austin. But as the list grows longer, and mediocrities outnumber the men of genius, it must become harder to fill the post appropriately. The appointment has led too often to literary oddness and absurdity.

The duties are light, and may be altogether avoided. Wordsworth wrote no official poems, but accepted the laureateship merely as a tribute to his place in English letters. It was often found, however, that good poets who conscientiously took notice of royal events wrote very bad verse. If the poets were not good, the verse became ludicrous. "What fulsome inanities," says Professor Greig, "poets laureate have been driven to, by the duty of extolling royal personages!" These lapses and failures cannot be surprising. A poet must feel deeply before he can write freely; and although he may share with others the excitement of a great occasion, he does not feel in it the power of his private vision. Further, official poetry, even though it be written spontaneously, has obvious limitations. Public joys and sorrows can be expressed with dignity in prose, but they do not bend easily to the stricter discipline of verse. The great English elegies—*Lycidas*, *Adonais*, *Thyrsis* and *In Memoriam*—were inspired by the deaths of friends or fellow poets: nothing comparable has been written by poets laureate on the deaths of kings. A personal sorrow

touches the deepest feelings, and may seek relief in thoughts which range far beyond the immediate cause, whereas a public grief compels a poet to say what is expected of him, and to keep close to the event.

These difficulties are greater if the royal person is universally respected. It is significant that the best official—or semi-official—poems were written when the monarchy was under strain and attack. In the days of the Stuarts a poet who wrote for a royal patron could be a partisan; he knew that his sentiments would be both applauded and derided in the taverns. Poets were often vain, mettlesome fellows who liked to quarrel (they are much the same today), and they could fight as easily over a royal ode as over a play that had been hissed from the boards. There were other incentives. The Court was then the centre of patronage, and the laureateship was sought eagerly, sometimes through intrigue and sycophancy. All this has been changed by the evolution of a constitutional monarchy. Kings and queens remain at the centre of national life, but their highest functions are symbolical, and are above party politics. The laureateship has become a vestigial office, surviving by weight of tradition.

A hundred years ago *The Times* described it as "nothing but a nickname," and said roundly that it should be abolished. It has ceased to be the best way of honouring a poet. The Order of Merit, conferred a year or two ago on T. S. Eliot, gives greater prestige; and literary pensions are more acceptable if they are freed from the lightest obligation. Nevertheless, tradition is one way of preserving history. If the laureateship disappeared, poetry itself would not suffer; but we sometimes need to be reminded, in these scrambling days, that poets have been valued by kings.

N.Z. LISTENER, MAY 1, 1953.