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BOOKS

Poems of Exploration

THE FALLEN HOUSE, by James K. Baxter;
The Caxton Press, Christchurch.

(Reviewed by M.K.J.)

MR. BAXTER is one of the most accomplished of our poets, and one of the most various: in the past 12 months, he has appeared as *poète maudit*, bush-balladeer and churchyard-Christian moralist. Each role is carried off with skill and conviction, and serves a purpose; but Mr. Baxter, in all his variety, is a fundamentally serious poet. Although the poems in this volume share a general unity of feeling, they show his range of references and techniques: he can quote appositely from Eliot, elegise the dead Hart Crane, write an excellent love sonnet in the mood of Donne, or salute, in Hardy-esque verse, the memory of Thomas Hardy. He can turn lines which have the firm abstraction of Auden ("Fallen then the city of instinctive wisdom") or infuse them with the energy of Dylan Thomas—

Who now lies dumb, the black tongue dry
And the eyes weighed with coins.

He can also write quite simply, and movingly, in a poem like the "Elegy for An Unknown Soldier"—

So crown him with memorial bronze among
The older dead, child of a mountainous island.

Wings of a tarnished victory shadow him
Who born of silence has burned back to silence.

He seems most himself in a poem like this, or in considering the courtesy of young to old (in "To My Father") or the wild innocence of childhood (as in "Poem by the Clock Tower, Summer")—in all things which reveal "traditional piety and gentleness."

Most of these short poems spring from a single scene, or event, or recollection; and Mr. Baxter possesses the Wordsworthian gift of holding in the memory a commonplace experience—a firework display, raiding a wild-bees' nest, or steaming into Lyttelton Harbour—and contemplating it until it gives up his hidden meaning. This power to see into the object gives his images their precise but suggestive quality, as in—

the bald eroded summits
Massaged incessantly by the wind's pliant fingers.

the army blanket of grey earth
Put off, Lazarus from the cave mouth
stumbled.

And it accounts for his enviable gift of ending a poem strongly, with the everyday scene opening on a vision of the human heart as a ruinous mansion, or the bedroom door open for the Furies to enter. Like all good poems, these are poems of exploration; and like a good explorer, Mr. Baxter ends by bringing us news of discoveries.

THE FALL OF TOBRUK

CRISIS IN THE DESERT, by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner; Oxford University Press. English price, 42/-.

THE fall of Tobruk cost South Africa 10,000 men, a third of her fighting strength, and left South Africans with a bitter taste in their mouths. But there is no trace of bitterness in this history of those critical three months, May-July, 1942. The authors (Editor-in-Chief and Assistant Editor respectively of the Union War Histories) have let the facts



JAMES K. BAXTER
Exploration produces discovery

speak for themselves. They have presented them so interestingly, interpreting and expanding where required, that the picture is clear and criticism unnecessary. Much can be read between the lines, however.

With all the advantages given by access to enemy records as well as to their own, the authors are able to compare British and enemy versions of the same incidents. Sometimes they give what they carefully call "the most likely explanation" of these happenings, once or twice remarking mildly, though careful to resist the temptations of hindsight, that "the observer is inclined to wonder what could have been effected" had such and such a course of action been taken. Each piece of evidence fits into place: signal and answer and intercept (the Germans were well served by the carelessness of British commanders whose unguarded signals sometimes gave them fore-knowledge of our intentions); operation order and report; unit history and published memoir. Nor is the part played in the battle by the personalities of commanders on both sides neglected.

The book is beautifully printed and well bound; clear maps make the narrative easy to follow, and the inclusion of German maps (although redrawn) helps to show clearly the enemy's intentions and the mistakes of his Intelligence in assessing British strengths and dispositions.

The photographs are good but not outstanding, and some of the pictures of British and enemy tanks and guns could have come straight from an Army recognition manual for all the life there is in them. The addition of detailed figures of unit casualties in places would have helped the reader, better to form an opinion on the severity of the fighting.

—W.A.G.

EARLY AUSTRALIANS

TRUE PATRIOTS ALL, or News from Early Australia, as told in a Collection of Broadside, garnered and decorated by Geoffrey C. Ingleton; Angus and Robertson. Australian price, 42/-.

HE is rude or stupid, or both, who sneers at Australians as "descendants of convicts," but the transportation era in Australian history cannot be ignored. Indeed, the editor of this very remarkable record of that era accuses

N.Z. LISTENER, MAY 15, 1953.