

LESSONS FROM LAUGHTER

NEW ZEALANDERS still take themselves too seriously; they seem to have developed a defensive attitude, an attitude which is not necessary; and they show a tendency to apologise for faults that really are not there. This opinion was expressed to *The Listener* by Professor Joseph Jones, of the English Department of the University of Texas, who has been in this country for several months as a Fulbright lecturer in American literature. Professor Jones has been studying New Zealand literature. He will be heard shortly from main national stations in a series of six talks on American humour.

"Humour forms a significant part of American literature, and has done so through its whole history," he told *The Listener*. "But in New Zealand the early promise of a robust strain of frontier humour does not seem to have developed. I thought Maning's *Old New Zealand* the most outstanding humorous writing I've come across here, but there's a good deal of distance between Maning's gusto and current satire—with nothing between.

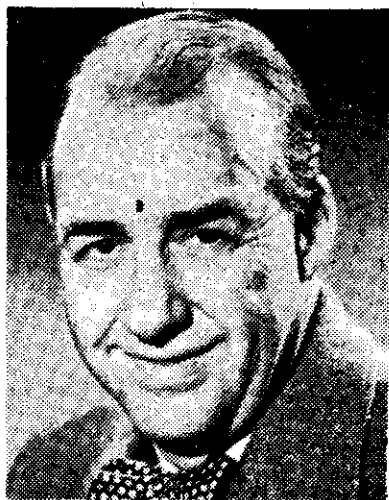
"One of the additional graces of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* is the occasional moment of relaxation when Butler says something just for the sake of being funny. Any satirist who knows his business will provide enough absurdity to keep the satire from grinding grooves. And New Zealand humour takes a satiric line, often highly literary.

"Maning may have imported his humour, but I think New Zealand touched Butler deeply. He took his back with him. It was inspired here. Apart from such pioneers, however, I can see no trend towards an indigenous humour. There is no New Zealand writer with a reputation established on the basis of this sort of writing alone, and no apparent promise of such a writer. Modern authors show no well-

defined tradition of New Zealand humour."

Professor Jones felt there was ample material here for the development of a native humour, but it had not been exploited. There was a feeling among some authorities that a humorous play, for example, might fail for lack of an audience; or worse still, might be duly approved and appreciated—with seriousness and solemnity.

This very trait of seriousness, the Professor thought, was a fruitful source of comedy. "Controversy in which both sides are tremendously earnest and quite unyielding enables the observer to stand outside the argument and say, 'Look, they're funny, aren't they!' Thurbur provides a magnificent example of this in *The Male Animal*, which exploits a very serious argument between a board of trustees and a university professor. When it was written the events which inspired *The Rape of the Lock* had both sides furious, but the poem



Amalgamated Studios photograph

PROFESSOR JONES

"We learn something from a good laugh"

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three saddles and down the same route as the descent of the guides' race. In the final stage the owners, standing behind the finishing line with a bowl of warmed-up food as reward, are allowed to whistle to their individual hounds (If rumour is true, there are more whistlers than these out along the Grasmere hills; but the judge is the master of the Windermere Harriers, a huntsman is secretary, and they have a whole posse of assistants to see that the trail is fairly run.)

If the guides' race is supreme for human interest, the hound trails excel for the sheer poetry of motion out of doors. From the thrilling moment when the first hounds come in view over the crest of the fells three or four miles away, to the last triumphant dash down the hillside, over the stone wall, and—in a babble of sound, "John Peel" criss-crossed by shrill-pitched piping—across the road into the waiting arena, where damp muzzles are buried gratefully in the inadequate bowls, this contest has the accumulated suspense of race, steeplechase and cross-country marathon. The "Old Dogs" are more expert and silent, and no doubt give greater pleasure to the connoisseur. But the unpredictable puppies, lunging, rolling about, and indulging in incredible and unaccountable spurts that keep the issue

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in doubt to the last five yards, are the trail-runners for our money. It was inevitable, I suppose, that there should be an immediate appeal against the puppy winner, on the claim that he had not completed the course. But there was no doubt about Ranger's fine win, in the old dog trail; and Ranger has already joined the immortal company of Crafty and Cleaver and Coniston Hound, of Music and Smoker, and Barmaid, of Icecracker, Echo, Roguery and Bouncer, and all the Grasmere winners of a hundred years.

Embarrassing Epilogue

This is the heroic side of the Grasmere sports, and long may it flourish. But I must add a line on the perfect anti-masque to this battle of giants, which came (for us, at least), with the judging of wrestlers' costumes. This serious task was entrusted to three formidable ladies and a tweed-clad gentleman, before whom the wrestlers, victors and vanquished alike, were solemnly ranged on parade.

Lakeland wrestling kit consists of a short-sleeved white singlet and not-so-tight "tights" of the same material (both of which may be picked out, on chest and thighs, with small delicate designs) and matching trunks and heavy woollen socks, blue, green or crimson for preference—the trunks most elaborately

through the medium of satire, in effect says, 'Look, they're making a mountain out of a mole hill. That's funny!' And, of course, it is."

In the field of verse writing Professor Jones found more cheerful prospects. "In fact," he said, "it seems that when a New Zealander wants to say something funny, he does so in verse. Personally I prefer prose as a medium; but 'Whim Wham,' for example, has a long and quite distinguished record as a humorist. In the work of Denis Glover humour is quite clearly an ingredient, too. Airini Woodhouse's anthology of Farm and Station verse includes some very good examples of authentic local humour, though some of the incidents described—worthy of the prose of a Mark Twain—would have been better handled in prose."

Asked about graphic humour Professor Jones said that here again there seemed to be no flowering of a truly indigenous product. There were individual exceptions, such as Minihinnick and Lodge, but there did not seem to be any widespread exploitation of New Zealand's own experience. There was no New Zealand equivalent of Al Capp and his Lil Abner. "Al Capp's work is completely original, a splendid series of take-offs. He is a master of the art of burlesque. Perhaps the nearest approach to this type of thing I've seen here is the Australian Bluey and Curley strip—but this does not live up to its potentialities. When, as happens only occasionally, real Australian folk material is used, it is very good. More often the artist takes a joke most people have heard before, and simply works it in. Surely New Zealand artists could produce a newspaper strip with continuity of humour and real vitality from the



"I had to come home, early, dear. Terribly sore throat and backache"

source material around them right here."

"All really first-rate humour, it seems to me must show its 'illuminating fraction'—some variable residue of truth and wisdom that passes over and condenses after the effervescence of laughter," says Professor Jones in the first of his six talks. "Whether we always realise it or not, we learn something from a good laugh; and the lesson is sometimes a deep one." Professor Jones begins with a quick look at American humour from the frontier days down through such figures as Mark Twain and Petroleum V. Nasby to the present, which, he thinks, may come to be regarded as a golden age in American humour. Americans, he says, live now in the most prolific age of graphic humour their nation has seen, with *The New Yorker* and Walt Disney as the two great stimulating agents mainly responsible.

Since *The New Yorker* has bred most of the present-day graphic humorists, he discusses the work of several of these—George Price, Peter Arno, Helen Hokinson Charles Addams and James Thurber—before going on in his third talk to a fuller discussion of the place of *The New Yorker*. His summing up is that in its treatment of the American it has kept its laurels green "by an attitude of mind which strives to unite a quick and keen-eyed sympathy with the resolution to be fooled as infrequently and as little as possible." This, says Professor Jones, embodies the very heart of what is most to be sought after in the humorous view of life.

In the second half of the series Professor Jones deals with three big figures from the present or recent past—S. J. Perelman, Will Cuppy and James Thurber. Throughout the talks he uses many entertaining illustrations. New Zealand readers will know the work of Perelman and Thurber, but for a great many this will be their first meeting with Will Cuppy a man who wrote funny pieces with even funnier footnotes about birds, beasts and fishes, and who for years before he died in 1949 worked on a book about the hallowed names of human history—a book which turned out to be his masterpiece.

The first talk by Professor Jones will be heard from 1YC at 10.0 p.m. on Thursday, October 8, and the second at 9.37 p.m. the following Saturday.