

Books and Men

Australian Literature Wins Respectful Attention

Book Production Has Taken a Sudden Spurt

[An article headed "Australia writes of Herself," written by Nettie Palmer, appeared recently in the "Christian Science Monitor." The following are extracts from it.]

A CURIOUS development of the economic depression in Australia has been the sudden and surprising growth of book production. Half a dozen new publishing houses have sprung up in Sydney during the last few years, with formidable lists of books, embracing travel and technical works, as well as fiction; and the lead is being followed in other large Australian cities. It is a growth not at all welcomed by English publishers, to whom the Australian and New Zealand market was a very valuable one, statistics proving that the people in these countries buy even more books than North Americans. Recently several of these publishers have paid hurried visits to Australia to find out the cause of the trouble.

Yet it is a calamity only to English publishers. Most persons are inclined to regard it as a healthy and natural development. In part, of course, it has been stimulated by the depression; a country with the exchange strongly against her cannot afford to pay overseas prices for books—or boots. But that is not the whole explanation. For some years there has been growing among the Australian public an appetite for books about its own life, addressed primarily to itself; and these were not being supplied satisfactorily by overseas publishers, who had their eyes fixed on an audience of their own near at hand.

Until recent years the problem did not arise. It was easy for Australian settlers of earlier generations to persuade themselves that all they needed could be brought from abroad. Whole decades passed in which the literary silence was broken only by a few historians treating partial aspects of settlement, a few writers of essays on established and rhetorical themes, a few poets publishing small books of conventional verse. Such literature was "colonial" in the worst sense of that word, apologetic and derivative, its one function, in a country subject to new waves of settlers, being to keep books alive. If the original work was so slight that Marcus Clarke's "For the Term of His Natural Life" stood out, the effort to preserve the best that was said and thought in the world was not without result. When he visited Melbourne in 1871, Anthony Trollope noted

with astonishment what he had never seen in Europe—a large public library free and open to everyone who dropped in.

Challenging, sardonic, rebellious, Australia's growing democracy found expression in the "Bulletin" of Sydney,



Here is a charming photograph of winsome Shirley Temple. The "Radio Record," in co-operation with the Fox Film Corporation, is offering a first prize of £25 to the little New Zealander who most resembles Shirley. See full details on pages 30 and 31.

a paper whose influence in the 'eighties and 'nineties can hardly be overestimated. It is enough to say that the chief story-writer it evoked was Henry Lawson, of whom Edward Garnett said that he "expressed a continent." Beside its work as a newspaper, the "Bulletin" produced several books of great vitality and influence that overseas publishers would have refused.

In these writers occurs the persistent fantasy that Australia, this last-found

continent, might become Utopia. Collins had a wry smile and no illusions, yet holds to his dream. This dream was to be suggested, sifted and sustained by a poet of greater power, Bernard O'Dowd, whose chief work, "The Bush," is essential to an understanding of the Australian spirit. Responsive to the appearance of the bush with its curious beauty of prehistoric trees and harmless, primitive animals, O'Dowd has also his ideas of human society in that setting.

The first volume of what was to prove a great historical trilogy, "The Fortunes of Richard Mahony," by Henry Handel Richardson, was published abroad in 1917, but was hardly read until the third volume, appearing more than 10 years later, made a stir all over the English-speaking world. With its tragic central figure, this masterly trilogy of universal interest; for Australia it has special value in its creative presentation of the growing life of the country through several decades. It has been both the support and despair of subsequent writers; support, because it takes away all hesitation about doing their best work at full strength; despair, because its concentration and imaginative power are so high.

It used to seem that the very conditions of Australian life, especially in the bush, led to a merely episodic treatment in short stories. There was need for the fuller presentation of successive epochs before they had vanished from the memories of men; and for the analysis of contemporary life. All this, as it seems, has begun. Writers working in isolation, in different parts of Australia, have almost simultaneously begun to fill in the very complex and varied scene.

There have been the lively chronicles of that writer who prefers to be called Brent of Bin Bin, reviving legends of settlement in outlying places and following the characters down to the present day. In quite a different mode are the deliberate and decorative novels of old Sydney by M. Barnard Eldershaw. In Martin Mill's "The Montforts," a brilliant attempt was made to foreshorten the Anglo-Australian experiences of a Melbourne family during a century. Brian Penton, in "Land-takers," has traced the development of a typical romantic young Englishman of the Byronic period into a hard-bitten Australian grandfather.

All these writers found material ready to their hands in histories, diaries and letters. Others, again, have faced the contemporary scene, seeking "the pattern in the carpet." The novels of K. S. Prichard have discovered daring and divers patterns in the lives of people up and down Australia: timber-getters in jarrah forests ("Working Bullocks"), miners in rocky ridges ("Black Opal"), people in little country townships ("Fay's Circus").