

THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

BY
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FEW years ago, when in London, I was asked by the literary editor of the "New Statesman" to write an article explaining why Australia had done so much less in literature than in the other arts. The demand, posed in this double-edged way, was a little disconcerting—rather like being made to answer the old question, "Have you left off beating your wife yet?" I found

that nothing was known of what Australia really had done in literature. It was taken for granted that some creative work had been going on in music, painting and architecture; but that in the matter of writing Henry Handel Richardson was a lone swallow who did not make a summer.

Little was known of Henry Lawson; nothing of Tom Collins, Chris Brennan, Bernard O'Dowd, and other people who held significance for Australia. And, it is hard to demonstrate to an outsider the importance of work unfamiliar to him. One can only do it by direct statement, and that does not carry conviction very far.

"If their work is interesting," comes the query, "why isn't it known here?"

No use to reply that it is hardly known on their native heath! That only makes confusion worse. Yet the simple truth of the matter is that scattered literary work of great value has been done in Australia over the last seventy years; that it amounts to something considerable in bulk and has had a deep influence on the national life; but that, through a variety of circumstances, it has remained largely unknown.

Tom Collins's "Such is Life" will afford an example of what I mean. This book was published over thirty years ago—large, unwieldy, packed with wit, philosophy, bush lore—and it has gone on finding its readers ever since. So wide has its influence become that practically every literate man in Australia has come in contact with it at some time or other. But its circulation has been peculiar. Though it has affected the minds of large numbers of people, particularly writers, less than a thousand copies have been sold within a generation, and I have never seen a copy in a bookshop window. Even to-day the name of the author remains comparatively unknown. When a memorial to him was unveiled at Yarra Glen a few months ago there was no representative of our seats of formal learning, but instead a German professor of English from Bonn.

This treatment of "Such is Life" is typical of our past attitude to literature. It has been allowed to nourish the roots of the country, but not to show its head above ground. Sometimes it seems as if the practice of literary expression was deliberately discouraged. No one would admit this,



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but there are questions hovering in the air above our busy streets, so concerned with sport, business, politics. Why all this fuss about having a literature of our own? Why waste time writing books when "all the best and all the latest" can be imported so easily from overseas?

The answer, of course, is that books which are revelations of our own life can't be imported, and that they are necessary to our full growth. Literary expression is just as natural to civilised people as breathing, for through it they find their adjustments to the society about them, and to the universe in general. If we lived in a completely centralised world, with no frontiers, no variety, no local differences of character, and insti-

with no frontiers, no variety, no local differences of character, and institutions, there would be less need of national literatures. Books would be produced at some metropolis, like everything else that called for highly-concentrated effort, and artists would gather there, leaving the outer spaces to wool-growing and raising wheat. But since the world is divided into nations and societies, it is necessary that these shall find their own forms of expression, each subtly different from the others.

That is the social aspect of the question, a particularly important one here in Australia. We have to discover ourselves—our character, the character of the country, the particular kind of society that has developed here—and this can only be done through the searching explorations of literature. It is one of the limitations of the human mind that it can never grasp things fully till they are presented through the medium of art. The ordinary world is a chaos, a kaleidoscope, full of swift, meaningless impressions that efface one another; the world of a well-pondered novel or drama is designed as an orderly microcosm where people and things are shown in their true significance. And so unless a country has its life fully mirrored in books it will not show a very rich intelligence in the business of living.

For one thing, not knowing itself through its literature, it will be unsure of itself, fussily self-conscious in the presence of strangers. It will be continually pressing visitors to say what they think of it—its climate, its landscape, its sporting achievements. No one ever finds Englishmen or Frenchmen with this kind of curiosity. Their qualities have been discovered for them long ago.

Yet it would be no harm if we had a real curiosity about ourselves that went below the surface. This curiosity is one of the things that literature sets out to satisfy, or to tempt into deeper channels; and in the past seventy years we have learnt a little about our own qualities and failings. We have begun the spiritual adjustment to our surroundings. We have even learnt to live with our own bonny earth in a spirit of affection. It is not the same haggard landscape our ancestors looked on with loathing. We search out its beauty spots; we decorate our houses with its foliage—gum-tips, wattle bloom.

And we are gradually coming to explore with interest the society we have brought into being. The novel has been the chief instrument for this, and it will become increasingly important in the next fifty years. A large area has been sifted by our writers, and they have burrowed back into the past with the purpose of uncovering our roots. There has been the theme pose of the exile who could not adjust himself ("Fortunes of Richard Mahony"), of the exile who adjusted himself after years of torment ("Landtakers"), of the successful foundation of a family in Sydney ("A House is Built"), and in Melbourne ("The Monticoris").

But the exile theme is only a passing one in our fiction, and not the most interesting. The problem of the immigrant spiritually lost in a new world is largely a thing of yesterday, and perhaps it was rarely very acute. Lately writers have shown a disposition to turn their eyes to realities more immediate. There is the theme of the vanishing race, with its wild charm and its tragic doom ("Conardoo"), of the rebel herd being driven back before the fence ("Man-Shy"), of the newly-conscious Australia at war ("Flesh in Armor"), and its thinking youth face to face with the universal economic problems ("Seven Poor Men of Sydney").

All this makes up a considerable body of writing, in scope and quality, and yet it is only a fairly random picking from the books that have been published during the last ten years. The remarkable thing about this new writing is its sincerity and its increasing air of confidence. There was a time, and not so long ago, when Australian novels were written with a faint air of apology. They had to make themselves acceptable to English publishers, and were not sure of the right way to do it. This brought uncertainty to their manner; they were coy, provincial, "colonial." One felt that the eyes of their authors were on the ends of the earth, not on the things they were writing about. Luckily we have grown out of all that into a more adult world.

At least part of this is due to the recent surprising growth of publishing in Australia. The books that have poured out from these presses have been uneven in quantity, and some have had small literary value, but at least they have taken the Australian background for granted, and that has marked an advance. Often they have been purely books of experience, accounts of adventure or ordinary living in odd parts of the continent, like those of Ion Idriess. There is no art in these, nothing of permanent worth; but they serve their purpose as sketchy surveys of country yet to be ploughed. It will be easier to write in future because of scenes and characters such authors have brought into the general view.

All this seems to emphasise the social function of literature, its role of helping people to adjust themselves to their surroundings or their surroundings to themselves. Well, that is the tendency of the time. From Russia, where writers are completely concerned with the new experiences of industrial organisation, to England, where the young poets like Stephen Spender are calling on their fellows to make poetry a living force again, the impulse is to insist on literature's social importance. Poetry, in its nature, is more concerned with man's relation to the universe than to his fellows. The most distinguished of our own younger poets, Bertram Higgins, has always ignored the limits of time and place. His Mordecaius is a Romanised Jew; his interest is in problems that are absolute and eternal. But he is something of a "sport." Of our chief poets of the older generation Bernard O'Dowd, Furnley Maurice, Hugh McCrae and Shaw Neilson, the two first have always been modern in relating poetry to the world about them.

Our main lack in the literary field is a lively and intelligent criticism. There are columns of gossip about books and authors in all our papers, but little sense of values. Criticism in Australia has lagged badly behind creative work. One cannot forget that when the first volume of Henry Handel Richardson's masterly trilogy appeared it was hardly reviewed at all, and the comment of our chief literary paper was that it must have been written by a retired grocer. The criticism of music, painting, even the drama, is taken seriously and done by experts, but when it comes to literature people believe that one person's opinion about a book is as good as another's, one vote, one value.

This does not affect writers so much in their work (since they are used to getting full and free criticism from their fellow craftsmen), but it makes it more difficult for them to find their proper audience. Thirty years ago a critic like A. G. Stephens could ~~write a million~~ ^{interpret a book's intention}, stirring up interest in it. That is why the very small flow of good writing in those days cut such a deep bed. A comparatively unimportant writer like Albert Dorrington could then make a bigger impression than Leonard Mann to-day.

Yet in the last ten years a high general standard of writing has been reached, and one feels its vitality in the air. There has been a bubbling in our drought-sealed springs. I believe the new literary impulse will have a tremendous effect on Australia in the next fifty years. It will quicken its imagination, stimulate its powers of introspection, and make it as interesting to itself as every country should be.