

Australian Press Cuttings

Stalbridge Chambers,
443 Little Collins Street,
Melbourne, Vic.

From

"COURIER,"

Brisbane, Qld.

WILL DYSON.

CREATIVE MILITANT.

By NETTIE PALMER.

B R I S B A N E has always seemed to me very fortunate to have in its picture gallery certain war drawings by Will Dyson. Nothing that comes from this artist in black-and-white is without significance and power. In the days before the war he was producing satirical cartoons in London, where all the political and social movements were like a map in his mind, and G. K. Chesterton described Will Dyson's lines as being like that of a stock-whip—a long, leaping thing, with an exact flick at the tip. Then, during the war, Dyson first produced his famous series of "Kultur-Cartoons," exhibited, I think, in 1915. Of these, perhaps, the most famous was "Alone with his God." It showed the Kaiser, a small, frail, but very military, figure, bowed on some tremendous altar-stairs; on the level at the top of the stairs was a seated deity, figure and face in all ways like the Kaiser's as he would wish them to be, powerful, abundant, austere! A great conception, and, like all Dyson's work, not limited to its immediate impression. In the end, you were not left with contempt for an egocentric man, but with a pity for all possible types of egocentric mankind. A year or so after the appearance of "Kultur-Cartoons" Will Dyson was sent to the front as artist with the Australian army. Whatever other artists or journalists may have made of such an opportunity, with Dyson it was no sinecure, no safe billet. Apart from at least one wound, he suffered intensely in his sheer understanding of the men's agony and courage. He felt that here was a superb generation being destroyed before his eyes. It was this grief that found permanent expression in certain poems he then wrote—poems that have a high place on their merits, and not merely as the work of one whose usual medium was line and not words—and also in the war drawings like those in the gallery. When the war was over, Dyson was as exhausted as any soldier, and for cause. He has taken up his work, however, these many years past; and about six years ago he came back to Australia, where he now "lives, his work leavening our lump. That our corporate life really is a "lump" he not only admits, but emphasises, and his analysis of the state of affairs was uttered last week in a brilliant lecture on "The Arts in Australia."

"THE ARTS IN AUSTRALIA."

It is difficult to summarise a statement which, as delivered, was already summary and compact, but perhaps I can suggest its outline here. Will Dyson said, then, that we pay lip-service to the idea of art as nationally important, while giving art no practical basis in our national life. He was not dealing with the plastic arts nor with music, which in one way or another occupy a comparatively honoured position amongst us, but with literature the thought-basis of the

arts, which is denied all serious expression. Along among "adult" and liberate nations, we have no serious belief in the importance of giving full expression to our developing mental life. We have a lack of publishing houses, of quarterlies, of reviews, of satirical comment on our political and social life. We are content to be consumers, returning nothing to the world from which we import so freely:—

An active publishing trade is the attribute of all adult nations. Until we have one we must remain colonial, provincial, and outside. It is essential to a right understanding of one nation by another. The publishing houses of Germany, by giving out such books as "All Quiet on the Western Front," and "The Case of Sergeant Grischa," are putting Germany back on to the map of human kinship. The same will soon be true of Russia. Is it the American publishing houses that, by pouring out the works of Mencken, Dresler, Lewis, Sinclair, and O'Neill, are tempering the world's harsh and envious verdict on America.

What then will temper the world's verdict on us as a mere mental desert fed on tinned literature from overseas? Nothing but the habit of publishing books here. We cannot have Australian books effectively published and distributed here until, as in America, there is a publishing trade for all books. To make this possible we would need to alter our copyright law and make it in line with America's, a change that would be quite within our powers.

AGAINST NATIONAL COMPLACENCY.

Impassioned for Australian self-expression, and convinced that we have certain utterances to contribute towards the sum of world literature, Will Dyson begged his audience to face the facts of our inarticulate condition:—

The picture of Australia going cap-in-hand to Europe and America for all its mental food and its aesthetic entertainment is a disquieting one. We live on the charity of the world! Hostile critics paint a gloomy picture of our mental impotence; we cannot answer it, we can only excuse it, which is to admit it. The evidence with which such critics might be confounded does not exist to our hand, printed and bound in the pages of a book.

And what are the excuses that we make once we are driven to the last resort? We say, only too often, that we are pioneers, too busy to look up from the plough! This comes well from the millions of Australians trotting in to city circulating libraries every week, and consuming whatever is handed out: Will Dyson said:—

It is a little late in the day. We are no more pioneers than are the rato-

ners of Birmingham, of Dresden, of Munich, of Paris. Less, perhaps—there they are pioneering in thought: here we are neglecting the exploration of our great open spaces of the Australian mentality.

Perhaps it is best to leave the matter there, that last phrase giving us something to think over. Like many of Dyson's whip-lash phrases, even those written beneath his satirical cartoons, the phrase first glances with humour, then rangles, then spreads as a thought in the mind. This challenge has come at the right time. Certain pioneering of the Australian mentality has been surprisingly achieved this year in the form of the novel, against tremendous odds, which have had covering a vast varied circuit of time and place, "Coonardoo," "A House Built," and "Ultima Thule," all of whom emphatically praised abroad by critics like Arnold Bennett and Gerald Gould, proud to sign their names, as books in which Australia can rejoice. But the existence of such books only suggests the potentialities of others in all forms that have been driven underground. How long, as Will Dyson asks, will our serious authors have to look abroad for that chance of expression that Australia denies them?