

# THE VOICE OF NEW ZEALAND

SISTER MAURA

**S**LIM grace should mark a book of lyrics. What was it that was said of Coleridge's poetry, "He had written little, but the little ought to be bound in gold"? Any garnering of lyrics should deserve that; for it should hold within its slender compass only the pure gold of poetry.

Eileen Duggan's books, the three of them, have the lyrical format. They are: *New Zealand Bird Songs*<sup>1</sup>, which first warbled its "native wood-notes wild" a few years ago; *Poems*<sup>2</sup>, which took the reading world by storm in 1938; and finally, *New Zealand Poems*<sup>3</sup>, which shone out across the war clouds in 1940. All have in common a singing magic, the gift of phrase-making and of the creative use of ordinary words; but the three span a wide emotional range. *The Bird Songs*, clear and joyous, were written in a child-like mood for the children of those favored islands which Miss Duggan loves so well. In *Poems*, the music has deepened, but it still pours, pulsing and resplendent, from a well-spring of joy. The third book touches often the chord of sadness. Throughout Eileen Duggan's poetry, her Celtic past speaks unmistakably in her "great tender, fluting words" and the lovely curve of her rhythms, in her warm sincerity, and in the rare habit of 'thinking in her heart'.

The first book waves a lyric wand and brings the birds of New Zealand, living, gleaming, singing, within the reader's ken. Many are strange, others familiar, yet all assume an essential beauty in the kindling light of her imagination. Take, for instance, the handsome bandit so often casually noted beside a shore. Who else has made a lyric glory of him in eight simple lines?

## The Song of the Kingfisher

Why do you sit so dreamily, dreamily,  
Kingfisher, over the stream,  
Silent your beak, and silent the water,  
What is your dream?

A falling, a flashing of blue and of silver,  
Child, he is deep in the stream,  
Prey in his beak, and fear in the water—  
That was his dream!

1. Wellington: Harry H. Tombs.  
2. London: George Allen and Unwin.  
3. Allen and Unwin.

In *The Legend of the Cuckoo* appears a Gaelic turn of expression that has been beautiful on the lips of the Irish for centuries. As the young Christ passed up to Quarantana (a musical word) for the ordeal of the fast,

Every bird bent sideways in its sorrow,  
And whispered softly to Him as He went,  
"My brightness, are you black and lost in anguish,  
My sweetness, are you spent?"

And when He returned in smiling victory,

He blessed each bird along the broken lane,  
And said, "My little pity, it is over,  
My gladness, sing again."

Miss Duggan can evoke a mobile picture in a line or two, as,

A sea of sleepy Gannets—or a sea of lilies?  
Shining and shaking—a meadow of birds,

and lift it into drama with a poignant cry,

Gannet, O Gannet, which is the dearest?  
Sky, land, or water—you have all three!  
"My wing for the sky, my breast for the sea shore,  
But my heart, oh, my heart for the wandering sea!"

How tenderly she addresses the dainty Silver-eye!

Have you a hint that Spring has left its gateway?  
You fly as if you bore the freight of summer,  
As if you dripped from little wing and shoulder  
A spilth of blossoms.

What sympathy she has for the little sobbing Wood Pigeon, whom God pities from heaven!

O breast of soft, soft silver,  
O plumes of summer blue,  
O leaf-burnt bird of autumn,  
He comes to comfort you.

In a golden chorale, *The First Night*, she gathers the birds of New Zealand about the Crib "when each sandalled wind was still", and they sing their love to the little Christ.

So into the quiet dripped  
The great tender, fluting words,  
And a cross of stars burned blue  
At the blessing of the birds.

This is a book to delight that lover of birds, Saint Francis.

First favorite in *Poems* is, probably, the homely and exquisite lyric on our Savior's name, instinct with reverence, yet charmingly intimate, which begins:

We make that lovely sighing sound  
A thing too far away,  
A word and not a little name  
His mother used to say.

This poem and many another attest Miss Duggan's living faith, that spiritual passion so deep and sincere that it captivates even the literary critics, who scorn a shadow of pietism. *Saint Peter* is here, long since made widely known in Theodore Maynard's *Anthology*, and *After the Annunciation*, with the mystic beauty of its imagery and the spell of its metrical music. Here, also, are the passionate fervor of *A New Zealand Christmas* and the nimble-footed saintly preferences of *Presumption*. In flowing couplets, *Epiphany* explains just why it was that Mary, the village maiden,

Could confront with candid graces  
Those proud-lidded Gentile faces.

Unique in modern religious poetry is the understanding love of Christ expressed in *Nationality*, with its surprising climax:

He was the very Jew of Jews  
And yet since He was God—  
O you with frontiered hearts,  
Conceive it if you can—  
It was not life alone He gave  
But country up for man.

Apparently, belief is not easy for Eileen Duggan; her faith is a victor. She writes in *Didymus*:

It takes an Easter to convince my kind;  
I am like him who till his hand explored  
The gaping spike-holes in His offered feet  
Still shook his head against a risen Lord.

This book also offers the reader a small group of love lyrics which cannot be easily paralleled. In *Transparence*, the poet utters her mind in a sonnet as one of Shakespeare's heroines, Cordelia or Imogen, might. "Oceans are reticent", she begins; and closes with the sestet:

Ah, spare me love. I have no useful guile;  
My mind was put forthright into mine eyes,

And each arrested thought looks out apart;  
 I would not even have the lark's poor wile,  
 The sad, bare cunning that flees back and cries,  
 To keep your foot from coming near my heart.

And again:

You tell me that I am your skyline here,  
 Where hope and fear foregather in their flight;  
 It is my stubbornness that makes me dear,  
 A musing and a summer in your sight.  
 This is the only comfort for our clay—  
 My haze, my purples, cannot die away.

These sonnets have a pure-glowing passion that makes Edna St. Vincent Millay's appear cold. The elemental *The Tide Runs up the Wairu* has been often quoted, but *When in Still Air*, with its final quatrain, has not:

And I who have my signs of you  
 Am weatherwise in vain,  
 Oh you are gale and wet to me,  
 But come, my wind and rain.

In *Ecstasy*, Miss Duggan makes a luminous analysis of the creative process; she answers Kipling's reportorial questions, What? Why? How? Where? quite logically, but her utterance attains shining heights of poetry:

*What?*

What is the poet's ecstasy? A flying.  
 The soul unjessed, darts upwards, crying, crying,  
 The spirit flowing and the body drying.

*Why?*

A red leaf at a loss may cause the wonder;  
 A meteor's dive; the rebel hoofs of thunder  
 Out of the ambush of that cloud-clump yonder;  
 A cock that flourishes the gift of morning;  
 A smack that crops the sea, a blunt calf fawning;  
 Nations of flowers dew-sentinelled at dawning;

*How?*

Any of these may bring the dream, the vision,  
 Clearing the sight from dimness to decision,  
 Outsoaring the last skymarks of derision.

*Where?*

There in a country where no self can blind it,  
 The soul goes flying with no past behind it  
 And neither friend nor enemy can find it.

And then, in beautiful humility, she bows her head before the higher ecstasy of the saints:

But, even so, not its the highest soaring,  
 For others yet, both soul and body pouring,  
 Are raised above the ground in their adoring...

*Plagiarism* expresses her own severe working ideal. She quests across hidden waters—and better dock than claim another's headland! In cold of words and watches of the spirit, she combs the oceans; but when at length she finds the undiscovered, she exclaims in native enthusiasm.

Her third book opens with the ripple and gleam of a centenary ode; in a hundred and fifty-one lines it evokes the splendid past of New Zealand, and closes with the brief prayer, so fit these troublous times, "Ah keep our freedom whole!" At the other extreme of length is a free verse jewel in one sentence:

Foundation  
 As I walked through the paddock  
 A pine tree soared up gothic  
 And a dandelion  
 Romanesque  
 Its seed-ball misted  
 Like Saint Peter's in an air-fleece  
 And, seeing dome and spire  
 Unmortised, breathing,  
 I said, though flesh run pagan,  
 Earth is faithful  
 It groweth, small or great,  
 Its own cathedrals.

*The Dying Gull* has a peculiar loveliness; it is sad, and light as the drift of a bird through still air. *Swamp-land* interprets, lovingly enough, a sombre region:

God made this place for fallow twisted roots  
 And winds that limp the high-roads of the air;  
 For songless birds and broken-hearted fruits  
 And men who never learned a prayer.

*The Marina* closes on a note of personal sorrow. The poet bodies forth vividly sights and sounds of the southern country

where she belongs, and then cries out in half-bitter protest:

No one here knows, or knowing would remember,  
Nor would I remember if they let me be,  
For she is dead, with northern clods upon her,  
Who, in our childhood, knew these things with me.

One quatrain, *Brooding*, stands alone, complete and eloquent. It shows Miss Duggan's mastery of the cameo form:

Ah lift yourself from your own pain  
And think of others' misery.  
It is a swamp that sours in rain.  
The good land drains into the sea.

In this book more than in the others she is the voice of the Maoris, those gallant bronze tribesmen who are still masters of their destiny in New Zealand. *A Maori Lullaby*, *The Lost Tribe*, *A Maori to Mary*, and *Peace of Hina* speak for this people, sometimes in their own musical words:

She was the rain that blacks the running flax-fire,  
She was the bar that splits the raging flood-tide  
And still is felt at Moho-wao-nui  
The peace of Hina.

The hallmark of Miss Duggan's style is her creative use of words; her verbs, above all, are apt, significant, and wonderfully vital. *Twilight* illustrates this gift especially well, its verbs will repay study. I admire, in particular, her courage in using "clouted", though it is exactly the right word.

Of lines that flash out and take the mind by their brilliance, choice is difficult, they are so many; but here are a few chosen at random:

"A star came flying like a bird." *The Ozen*.  
"And thunderheads gloom over the last ghat." *Endurance*.  
"... his bray was silvered into song." *Didymus*.  
"And deeper than a humble bee's  
The black bloom of her hair." *Picture*.  
"Each sighing tussock roofs a quiet lark." *Tua Marina*.  
"Night, the slow dragon, ruffs its lambent scales." *Plea*.

Eileen Duggan shines by her own light; she is, not a planet, but a star. Everything she has written bears its seal of distinction. She does not reflect the mind or manner of others, even of the masters. Her work has extraordinary virility, yet she is always—not "feminine" perhaps, and certainly not "female", but very womanly. She imbues "the smack and tang of elemental things" with a radiant warmth—her Celtic birthright, surely—and clothes the whole in a garment of beauty.