

THE STRAIT OF ANIAN. Selected Poems by Earle Birney, the Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1948. Pp. viii, 84.

Of the forty-six poems in this book, twenty-seven are republished from Mr. Birney's earlier collections, *David and Other Poems*, and *Now Is Time*, for both of which he was awarded the coveted Governor-General's Medal for poetry, in the first instance in 1942, and in the second in 1945. The present volume is thus one of selected poems and provides the means for assessing the author's character, depth, and range of experience as a poet, as well as the direction his art has taken since he first began to publish over a decade ago. The wide popularity that these poems have enjoyed springs in part from the fresh and immediate sensory appeal of their imagery, and in part from the author's conception of life as a high adventure to be met with courage, and in full knowledge of the odds. They thus represent a departure from much modern poetry in which peculiar states of the individual consciousness are explored and wrought into a neobaroque metaphor that baffles all those who have not succeeded in mastering that difficult language. His temper and his talent, one would guess, have led him through the realm of metaphysical symbol to one of action in space and time. His fusion of the lyric with the dramatic rather than the didactic, and his application of this technique to the great issues of human destiny, both directly in some poems, and allegorically in others, help to account for the new note he has succeeded in striking in recent poetry. His terse utterances grow naturally out of the matter which, in each case, he confronts. Through expressions like "varnished sand" in the poem *Gulf of Georgia* the reader sees what the poet has described without having his credulity strained or being shocked as with pyrotechnics. He often employs words that lack transcendental qualities, and thus in many of his best epithets he achieves a sensory sheerness. For other purposes, as in his treatment of elemental or human forces in conflict, his metaphors have the vigour, clarity and strength of his own mountains, and it is as though the rugged terrain of the western Canadian cordillera had entered into the poet's soul.

One cannot, in fact, speak of his choice of words and the way he forms his images as though these activities were unconnected with his attitudes towards man and nature. In most of his work there is little if any overt sentimentality. When he is most deeply moved, as by the predicament of man in an indifferent universe, or by some tragedy of human provenance, he is a master of his craft and his lines move with the inevitability of true poetry. When he lapses into sentimentality, which happily he rarely does, he seems to lose his customary sureness of touch, and indulges in such banal expressions as appear in line 2 of the final verse of *Invasion Spring*. His poems addressed to women often seem self-conscious, and without authenticity by comparison with poems like *David* and *For Steve*, in which the sentimental note does not obtrude at all and a fine control over the medium is maintained. The poignance of the grief over a lost comrade is heightened by the measure of restraint he achieves by simple statement or understatement, highly charged

with emotion. What he cries out against is the senseless destruction of human life, and of the fine qualities of manhood, intelligence, kindness, understanding, vision and skill, but he is not without a desperate faith that the sacrifice, however heroic and, in a sense, however justified it may be in itself, has meaning in the larger human context. Ennoblement through sacrifice would not be meaningless:

Since you who walked in freedom
And the ways of reason fought on our front,
We foresee the plot is solvable, the duel worthy.

This conviction emerges in the second of the two parts into which the book is divided and in which the poet gives literary form to the responses that men have made to the great contemporary sickness in the human family, of which the second World War was a terrible symptom. In the first he speaks for Canada and her waxing nationhood, but the two problems, national and oecumenical, are ultimately the same, because they spring from the more fundamental predicament that confronts humanity as a whole in the face of what appears to be a brutish and indifferent universe. His idea of nature is not the opposite of that of the early Romantic poets, such as Lampman in Canada, for whom the natural order was friendly and spiritually restorative, for what is insensate cannot be hostile. It is this attitude that reveals how the landscape of British Columbia has exerted a powerful impact upon the poet's consciousness, and has heightened that sense of the irrelevance of nature to human purposes which seems most plausible to a generation that has come to accept, in a spirit of disenchantment, the philosophical implications of the Darwinian thesis. In *David*, one of the finest poems yet written in this country, the human drama moves forward to its swift and tragic climax among the "unknowing cascades" and the "incurious clouds". Elsewhere we are urged to think no more than we must

of the simple unhuman truth of this ocean,
that down deep below the lowest pulsing of primal cell
tar-dark and still
lie the bleak and forever capacious tombs of the sea.

When confronted with the crimes and the stupidities of brutalized men, he may take a grim delight in the thought that "The beautiful bright coyote" will outlast them all, but such reflections seem to release him from the slough of pessimism in which Hardy and Housman were caught. Far more positive than they, he affirms that man's soul is a nursery of qualities of transcendent worth, and neither the blind events of the physical world, nor the ephemeral character of human life can diminish the kingdom to which they belong. Only in terms of these qualities can human life have the meaning that Mr. Birney surely believes it has. To the extent that man transcends the conditions of his brutish origin, he deserves the title of humanity, but there has been an age-old struggle between the finest and best, to which all men may win, and the dark tide of savagery from the presence of which they may never completely free themselves:

men be swift to be mankind
or let the grizzly take.

The rise of fascism that issued in "twelve red years of rage" no more invalidates the fundamental tenets of civilization than does the evident reality of the world of beak and claw, but it shows how blurred and uncertain are the boundaries between the kingdom of man and that of the brute, and how hard man must yet strive to conquer the enemy in himself. For Mr. Birney leaves us in no doubt as to where the danger lies:

No one bound Prometheus. Himself he chained
and consumed his own bright liver.

In three related poems, *Hands*, *Dusk on the Bay*, and *Vancouver Lights*, the first written in 1939 and the other two early in the War, he expresses the despair that then possessed him as he pondered the spectacle of a self-destroying humanity. The theory of the freezing universe of contemporary astrophysics may have lurked in the background of his consciousness as he wrote *Vancouver Lights*, but the immediate occasion for the composition of all three poems, appears to have been the prospect, years before Hiroshima, of the extinction of *homo sapiens*, or at best the approach of a new Dark Age. In *Hands* the logic of the organic cycle is asserted to have no counterpart in the death of men. The idea of nature, in this poem, as an inchoate and elemental realm beyond good and evil, is symbolized by the "cold and unskilled cedar whose webbed claws" focus no bombsight, and by the balsam, and the alders that "are not of my flesh". By contrast with these trees man appears as a stranger and a misfit in a universe to which his moral sense seems altogether alien. Man's tragedy seems to lie in the fact that as he has evolved he has found a moral order, essential to his humanity, which appears to be contradicted by the facts of the physical world in which, in his own peculiar and partly selfmade way, he is fated to live. The emergence of his moral sense has been accompanied by a skill in the fashioning of contrivances that have come to endanger all those things that, in his moments of sanity, he holds most dear. *Dusk on the Bay* and *Vancouver Lights* are both developed in terms of the symbols of light and darkness, but with opposite connotations. In the former, to be more accurate, the sun is not so much a symbol as an accompaniment of evil. The sun that "rushes down through Asian skies, garish with burst of shell and unarrested rocket" will eventually come to shatter the precious night that he describes in terms of the sights and sounds of a happy and ordered existence, typified by the bathers on the shore. The words that are used in the early lines to describe the activities of the peaceful Canadian night are later skilfully woven into the contrasted context of war. The legs of the bathers "unsexed by distance" and the "waving arms severed with twilight" become the "limbs unsexed and severed" by the bombs at "stricken dawn in England". The night air that "lets fall a rain of quiet coolness on the flesh" becomes "the rain of iron cooling the flesh" to the temperature of death. The use of this technique of ambiguity is stark and moving in its effect on the reader, but it would prepare him imperfectly for the "epitaphic" forecast of cosmic tragedy in *Vancouver*

Lights. This poem has not received the praise it deserves since its first publication, in an unrevised version, in the *Canadian Review of Music and Art* in 1942, perhaps because it has appeared to be less architectonic and not so closely woven in texture as *Hands* and *Dusk on the Bay*. Yet it contains some of the most powerful lines to be found in the whole range of contemporary poetry. Although Mr. Birney can work effectively with the minutiae of nature, as in *Slug in Woods*, his sensibility responds as fully to the challenge of a vast canvas as does that of Mr. E. J. Pratt, although he does not share the puckish and buoyant humour of the latter. In part the impact of this poem is due to the "terror of space" and the awe of "the changeless night" and "the stark ranges of nothing" which his images evoke, but it is also among other devices, due to the use, in an interstellar context, of words that commonly denote small objects. Infinity of space and time, personified by the Nubian, "wears for an evening's whim a necklace of nebulae". In the encompassing night men are "the unique glowworms" or the "spark beleaguered by darkness". The eye that looked out on the miracle of light, breaking for the first time the tyranny of the timeless dark, would come to guide the fashioning hand and reveal the promise of the knowledge of good and evil. If man were a cosmic accident, his light might be extinguished by the same means, but the hazard of which the poet is here speaking springs from the glory and the fatal flaw in man himself:

These rays were ours,
We made and unmade them. Not the shudder of continents
doused us, the moon's passion, nor the crash of comets.
In the fathomless heat of our dwarfdom, our dream's combustion,
we contrived the power, the blast that snuffed us.

The author's deep compassion is concealed in this proud and wistful boast which he made as the world prepared to plunge further into the abyss of war. In these poems he does not explicitly affirm any grounds for hope, but in the poems written during the next few years one becomes conscious of a growing conviction that the holocaust may have meaning after all. It is in this hope that we must live, or know life lost.

A. G. BAILEY

LOOK TO THE SUN. By Weston McDaniel. With A Foreword by Alfred Kreymborg. New York. The Beechhurst Press. Pp. 63. \$2.50.

There is little doubt that Mr. Weston McDaniel, a Virginian himself, has an intimate knowledge of the South—its songs, legends, customs and beliefs. That knowledge is the background of the poetry in this slim volume, *Look to the Sun*,—a volume which, as the author says "should be read . . . not as a group of independent lyrics, but rather as a sequence in which witchcraft is symbolized to represent the forces that inhibit or retard man's development in the struggle for

Mr. McDaniel's poems fall roughly into two categories—the one in which he symbolizes, sharply and realistically, the forces of hate, fear, superstition, and intolerance, and the one in which he symbolizes the qualities of love, faith, understanding and tolerance.

The poet's touch is sure when he deals with intolerance, and here his style becomes part of his content. In his vivid portrayal of outcasts of society, like old Jenny "baking her twisted knees" by the fire, and Nora "wailing a pagan prayer," he never allows us to forget that southern society itself, and indeed the intolerance of human nature in general, has helped to make these people what they are. The poet's touch is less sure, however, in his lyrical interludes, in which tolerance is symbolised by the "whisper of the winds", the "blue land of the sky" and the "vision of hills fed by April sap". Here his style seems too harsh and jabbing, his metaphors too strained to carry such symbols of freedom and tolerance.

Alfred Kreymborg writes in his foreward: "This man, despite his cameo style, is in the philosophic tradition of Whitman and Sandburg." Unfortunately, however, like Whitman and Sandburg, Mr. McDaniel often fails to integrate his experiences. Although he mirrors his southern world with startling fidelity, he fails, in his poetry, to see any understandable tendency which will help to bridge the gulf between the intolerance of the present and the tolerance to which he looks forward in the future. The best he can do is look "to the sun," and to foresee with a facile Whitman-like optimism:

' . . . brothers of faith
Bound eternally
By cords of love.'

D. R. GALLOWAY,

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT IN CANADA. By R. MacGregor Dawson.
The University of Toronto Press, 1949. Pp. 188. \$3.00.

It is now more than fifty years since the late Sir John Bourinot wrote the first edition of *How Canada is Governed*. It was the author's aim to describe public institutions in Canada for the general reader, and he succeeded so well that his book became a recognized text in the field of Canadian Civics and Elementary Government. Later books covered much the same ground, but never quite took its place. In recent years Canada has evolved from a Dominion to a Nation, with consequent constitutional changes. Professor Dawson's delightful little book brings us up to date. It is "a short descriptive account of Canadian government, national, provincial, and municipal," written in a simple concise style which will appeal both to the student and the general reader. It should be a welcome addition to the library of every teacher and student of Canadian History and Government.

Canadian Government, Professor Dawson points out, has seven characteristics. It is democratic, representative, responsible, federal and subject to law; it guarantees an independent judiciary and it is

an independent unit within the British Commonwealth. As a democracy it represents the will of the people, and has regard for the minority as well as the majority. The will of the people is made known through an elected Parliament and a responsible Executive. As a federation, powers of government are divided between the National government and the provinces. All government is based on law, not on whim or caprice. Thus the Prime Minister, a customs inspector, or a policeman is under "the same legal compulsion to obey the law as the most humble citizen." (p. 12) Today with the growing complexities of modern government tending to place great power in the hands of the Executive, a sturdy re-assertion of the "rule of law" is both timely and urgent. The courts of our country stand as a guarantee against tyranny and injustice. The independent judiciary is "another part of the priceless heritage which Canada has received from England." (p. 14)

In discussing the Canadian constitution, Professor Dawson reminds us that it has more than one source. Most important is the British North America Act and its amendments, all of which are printed in the Appendices. Other sources are custom and usage, acts of parliament, judicial decisions, and the rights of a Canadian. The latter are to be found far back in British history, and should perhaps be redefined.

One chapter is rightly given to the powers of the federal and provincial government in the field of finance, and of efforts which have been made to define the limits of each. Mention is made of the Rowell-Sirois Report and of the present temporary agreements between the government at Ottawa and some of the provinces. Teachers and pupils will find in these pages material for careful study and discussion.

The chapters on the framework of government in Canada are of unusual interest. Especial mention may be made of the paragraphs describing the constitutional position of the Governor-General, the work of the Civil Service, the Amendment to the British North America Act of 1946 "to provide for the readjustment of representation in the House of Commons," the weakness in the present method of choosing Senators, and the place of political parties in our constitutional machine. An interesting and significant statement is made regarding the position of the Governor-General. It is his normal function to follow the advice of his Cabinet even though he may consider the advice foolish or wrong. He has, however, a reserve power of interference that the government of the country may be carried on constitutionally and honestly. (p. 39) This is, the reviewer believes, the conclusion reached by Dr. Eugene Forsey in his *Dissolution of Parliament*

The suggestion that new methods are needed in the appointment of Senators will revive old memories. Sir George Foster's statement, quoted by Professor Dawson, is quite to the point. "How colorless the Senate—the entering gate of coming extinction."

The study of provincial and municipal governments also deserves commendation. In addition to the better-known material, the author has explained more recent innovations such as proportional representation, plebiscite, initiative, referendum, and recall.

Professor Dawson has given us a very informative and readable book. The format is excellent and reflects much credit upon the publishers. The illustrations are useful and attractive.

RONALD S. LONGLEY

THE VERSE IN ENGLISH OF RICHARD CRASHAW. The Grove Press (18 Grove St., New York). Pp. 255. \$1.25.

THE CONFIDENCE MAN: HIS MASQUERADE. By Herman Melville. The Grove Press (18 Grove St., New York). Pp. 294. \$1.25.

In these days of mounting costs for books the new undertaking of The Grove Press should receive a warm welcome. The Press intends reprinting in good clear type and handy format English classics not easily available. There is very little editorial material, just enough to give the reader aid without coming between the writer and him. Any one interested in this new venture can receive a list of forthcoming titles by writing to the publishers.

B. M.

MEANJIN, a literary quarterly, Melbourne.

SIMBOLICA, a poetry magazine, New York.

The literature of most countries suffers from a lack of small magazines, whose publishers are unafraid to buy the work of new and unknown names. This is particularly true of Canada, where the only important non-commercial magazines are university publications, whose influence is limited in most cases, not by what they want to do, but by what is expected of them. Most larger magazines are neither willing to publish the work of literary unknowns nor, in many cases, able to recognize merit.

Richard Aldington tells the story that he was asked to contribute an article in which he would name new writers whom he thought would make their mark. "I made the choice," he says, "which I modestly think wasn't bad for 1919: James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and Marcel Proust." In due course he received a reply asking him if he could not name some writers likely to be heard of. He protested, and Logan Pearsall Smith was called upon to judge. The article was rejected. Had Aldington chosen "such mediocrities as Jack Squire, Hugh Walpole, and Frank Swinnerton," he should have received a "cheque and a crown of wild parsley."

To the little magazine we owe the publication of the early work of men like Hemingway, Eliot and Faulkner. Surely then, we are in debt to these magazines, particularly when we consider that they are often deserted by those writers to whom they gave first opportunity. The number of authors, big in the field of commercial literature, who have literally risen from the ashes of the little magazine is uncounted. Those of us who offer at least lip service to literature can try to repay the debt to these magazines, whose plight is clearly stated in *Meanjin* (1st

Quarter, 1949): "Literary reviews are at best risks for their owners; at worst they are severe losses," and "The applications made by the two surviving literary magazines to the Commonwealth (Australia) Literary Fund for financial aid have been rejected. Increased subscription is not the panacea for the ills of literary magazines, but it is some help."

Meanjin is a good little magazine. It offers its readers well-written fiction and poetry as well as informative articles. Each issue contains prints of works of sculpturing and painting, both modern and classical, and for the benefit of those who consider such things necessary we may add that it is attractively printed on good paper. Taken all for all, it is a magazine well deserving support.

Simbolica is another such magazine, perhaps more illustrative of the point. It is a poetry review printed by the duplicator process (and very well, too), with an arresting cover. It is a medium for the expression of writers who might find no other medium. Magazines of this nature may be offering encouragement to another Eliot. Such is not inconceivable.

In passing, it may be well for us to remember that we too have literary magazines and that manuscripts containing requests for subscriptions are by far the most popular with editors.

GERALD MOSHER

THIS IS NOVA SCOTIA. By Will R. Bird. Ryerson Press. Pp. 310. \$3.50.

A BOOK OF CANADIAN STORIES. Ed. by Desmond Pacey. Ryerson Press. Pp. 310. \$3.50.

Bird's book presents the appeal of Nova Scotia in the ideal order for the motor tourist and in a very satisfactory one for the person who is limited to vicarious travel. Tourist and reader alike are well guided around Nova Scotia, entering from New Brunswick, travelling to Rockingham, heading thence in the direction of Yarmouth, proceeding from there along the South Shore, making the grand tour of Cape Breton, and then continuing along Northumberland Strait, and out of Nova Scotia back into New Brunswick, all the while entertained not only by descriptions of scenic beauty but by delightful tales of the romance and the reality in the lives of those who have made Nova Scotia their homeland.

Although the exigencies of space permitted only a revision of the Introduction of the 1947 edition and the representation of two more authors by one story each, the revised and enlarged edition of Professor Pacey's *A Book of Canadian Stories* fortunately provides another opportunity of calling attention to the volume and to the excellence of its editor as a critic. Professor Pacey is by long odds the best critic among the many professors of English who have given critical atten-

A few professors of sufficient breadth of taste somewhat improved the situation, but now some of the younger professorial critics of Canadian literature seem likely not only to bring back that term but also to cause to be added to it a still more derogatory one, "sophomoric". Professor Pacey, like Lionel Stevenson, somewhat his senior, combines a thoroughly sound philosophy of criticism with literary taste broad enough to make his anthology adequately representative.

V. B. RHODENIZER

THE IRON HARVEST. By Geoffrey Johnson. Williams & Norgate
Pp. 46. 6 shillings.

Mr. Geoffrey Johnson has been for some years a contributor or poetry to THE DALHOUSIE REVIEW. Readers will welcome his latest collection. Those who have thought of Mr. Johnson as a mere writef of light, musical fancies will be agreeably surprised by *The Iron Harvest*; here we have richer and more subtle music than characterised his earlier poems. Moreover, one finds that Mr. Johnson's chief interest is in man and the dilemma in which man finds himself. There is deep understanding and pity for the poet's fellow men. Expecially have the sufferings inflicted on the defenseless during the late war left a deep impression on Mr. Johnson's imagination. There are poems here that the thoughtful reader will want to re-read several times.

B. M.

PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE. By Julian L. Ross. Syracuse University Press. Pp. 286. \$3.00.

Philosophy has fallen on evil days. There was a time when all knowledge was comprised under mathematics, philosophy, and theology. Gradually different branches of philosophy made great advances and then set up house for themselves: the natural sciences, and psychology, for example. Poor philosophy finds itself left with only metaphysics and logic under her wing, and both of these are suspect in many circles as being mere juggling with words divorced from real content. As a result the study of philosophy has declined to an alarming extent in most universities and colleges. Yet every cultivated reader needs to know something of the history and the persistent problems of philosophy. If we are to have a revival of the study of philosophy, what is the best approach? Through the history of the subject? Through the persistent problems? Through a study of various schools of philosophy?

Dr. Julian Ross of the Department of English in Allegheny College, has struck out on another line. All literature is, of course, strongly conditioned by the philosophy prevailing at the time of its composition. Why not, then, approach philosophy through great literature? Dr. Ross devotes chapters to epicureanism, rationalism, the Christian ideal, and so on, but always the approach is through masterpieces

of literature. Then follows an examination of the particular philosophy with a nice weighing of its advantages and shortcomings. Dr. Ross ranges everywhere throughout the field of literature from the Greeks to the Russians. The present reviewer has given his copy of the work to different undergraduates to read, and all are agreed that they have found the book exhilarating. One suggestion might be added: Dr. Ross should prepare an anthology to accompany the present volume. The two would make an excellent college course or well integrated reading for the laymen. It is hard always to lay one's hand at a moment's notice on the poem or essay under discussion.

B. M.

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR? By E. A. Chester. Ryerson Press
Pp. 47. \$1.00.

Chronologically, at least, this is not the 18th century, and it is unusual and refreshing to find a volume of sermons published under the name of sermons and not masquerading under a misnomer designed to fool the public and permit some one to shove the pious platitudes down its throat.

In his introduction the Reverend Eldred A. Chester outlines his purpose. "Briefly this is our plan", he says. "The Bible knows of mounts and mountains. The Bible knows of the valleys and the Bible knows of plains. And these correspond with levels on which our lives are lived. Each section is limited to three sermons, preceded by an introductory chapter with suggested Bible readings."

What Are We Waiting For? seems too conscious an attempt to mix verbal scholarship of the Old and New Testaments with a call to the faithful. The one detracts from the other. There is, moreover, a too obvious attempt to avoid the platitudinous, from which the sermons are, to some degree, saved by an equally obvious sincerity. Little attempt seems to have been made to appeal to the sceptic; he is put aside, gently, but firmly. A call to revival seems directed only to practising Christians. The final sermon answers the question posed by the title, *What Are We Waiting For?*—"waiting for—God" and ends with a general appeal for Christian missionary work, not at home, but in Africa and Asia.

GERALD MOSHER