

# Writers And Social Progress

1.

THE relationship between Australian writers and the struggle for political and social freedom involves two interwoven issues: the impact of Australian development on writers; the influence of Australian writers on changing the pattern of Australian society.

All writers have not been rebels or members of the A.L.P.; nor is it to be argued here that the writer should be forced to express any particular social philosophy; nor that literature is an automatic kaleidoscope of social change. But it is clear that there have been writers aware of social problems, so their social thoughts and actions are important factors for both the political activist and the literary critic.

This progressive interest is only a strain in our literature, but its existence was neglected, until Hartley Grattan, an American critic, emphasised the struggle for social equality as being important, not merely in the history of Australian social development, but in any appreciation of the literary significance of men like Lawson, Daley, O'Dowd.

The strain is dominant, not exclusive, nor unanimous in any particular expression of discontent and reconstruction. John Farrell was a land reformer; Lawson a nationalist and republican; T. Andrews an anarchist; Tom Collins a Socialist.

The conscious propagandists are important or numerous enough to insist that there cannot be any judgment of the relationship between society and the writer, if we ignore the conclusion to be drawn from this aspect of our literary history.

Vance Palmer in an article on "The Future of Australian Literature" which was published early in 1935, declared that since one of the limitations of the human mind is that "it can never grasp things fully till they are presented through the medium of art," the social function of literature must be emphasised, "its role of helping people to adjust themselves to their surroundings or their surroundings to themselves."

THE writers under discussion owed nothing to a knowledge of Marxian theory; often they owed no allegiance to a party. They wrote about popular causes with freedom from the disciplines of a political creed or organisation. Their influence was great because their propaganda, absorbed in their art, provided the idea or content that must be included in all artistic expression . . .

A cheeky Irishman stands on the paddie-box of a boat that is taking him, semi-freed, to the mainland, and recites—

"Land of lags and kangaroo,  
Of possums and the scarce emu,  
The farmer's pride, but the prisoner's hell,  
Land of b——s—fare thee well."

It is Frank the Poet's note of protest that stands out hopefully

from the sycophantic official eulogy of Michael Massey Robinson or the cynical prologue to a convict play.

"True patriots all, for he understood,

We left our country for our country's good;

No private views disgraced our generous zeal;

What urged our travels was our country's weal!"

TESTED by the literary standards of to-day the early ballads were not works of literature; nor did the convicts constitute immigrants of the type that a modern Minister would select for the development of a democratic, cultured community. Both were pioneers and as such are honoured as the predecessors of Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson or Nelson on the one side, and Wentworth, Peter Lalor, John Curtin on the other.

The note of revolt is there from the beginning; the association of the reformer and the poet arose from the days when William Charles Wentworth wrote into his academic verses on "Australia" an account of the explorations into the Australian environment, the need for political freedom, the struggles against continued transportation, and the vision of a glorious future for Australia.

THERE were, at least, two conquests in which the early writers participated, the victory over the limitations of the Australian scene and situation, and the struggle against the political limitations imposed by Britain.

A half century was to pass, before men and women could have such understanding or satisfaction with their environment that they could think in a way that made Australian poetry possible. Our literature was barren because the people had no contact with their environment—the right word is either "contact" or "relationship"; not "sympathy" nor necessarily "friendliness."

The Australian writers of later years have often hated the environment which they have interpreted. They were frightened even when they loved. But they had a "relationship" which took nearly a century to develop.

IT was not merely that these early dwellers feared or hated their surroundings, but that they were aloof, transitory dwellers of a heath forlorn.

They could not, for instance, have written a novel like "The Timeless Land" not merely because they were short of being great writers, not merely because they were ignorant of anthropological-psychological knowledge on which that novel by Eleanor Dark is based, but because their sympathy and understanding were limited.

Early Australians hated the trees, as Barnard Eldershaw has pointed out in such books as "The Life and Times of Captain Piper" or "Macquarie's World";

"Early journals and letters are full of the settlers' rage against

the trees. They hacked and they burned and still the trees crowded in upon them. The wood even was useless, it warped and split when they used it for building, in water it sank like iron. The trees were unfriendly, the woods were menacing, everything about them was strange and its strangeness culminated into something terrible, a nameless, invisible thing that undermined men's courage so that they fled when none pursued."

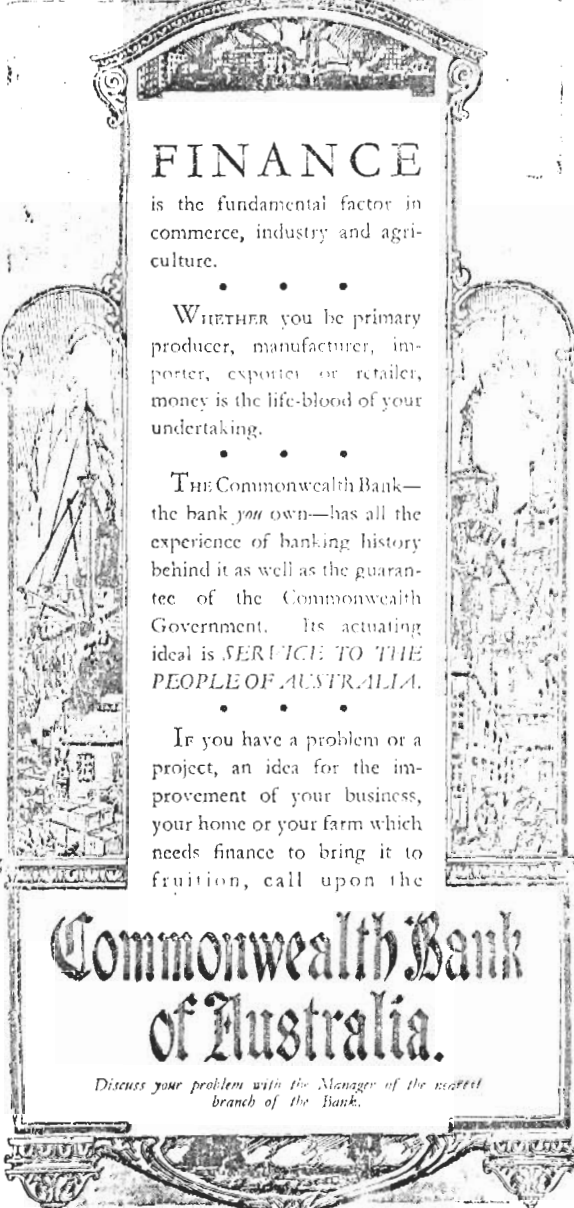
BEFORE the writer was free to become an Australian writer, he had to be assisted by the explorer, who conquered ignorance about the continent, by the scientist who explained its flora and fauna, and the citizen who settled down to make Australia his home by winning for Australians democratic rights.

There is, therefore, no surprise

in the discovery that such poets like Parker, Lang, Hemmings, Tompson and Harper were serious citizens and propagandists for political reform. They were fighting to win more for those who psychologists would be best fitted to feel the sympathy between their own and their hopes.

Australian writers have suffered from a double injustice: they continue as though they were still English was to suffer from the contradictions and hostilities which existed between Australia and Britain; to write as Australians was to pretend to have an understanding that they had not yet reached, but that they were reaching in their political and economic struggles.

(Continued on page 11)



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**AUSTRALIA** was still mainly convict she had few rights of self expression, little political or intellectual freedom—and who knows that this also may not have been an important reason for the barren field?—a few opportunities for expansion, and little reason for inspiration.

Life was a maze of conflicts, but not grand conflicts that could arouse the poet to action or inspiration—conflict with the land itself, conflict with great mountain barriers that dwarfed the mind, between the convict system and its victims which produced primitive cries of the lashed or the insane reaction of bushranger Howe—

"In the knapsack was a little book he had made of kangaroo skin called his Journal of Dreams. In it he had written in blood a record of his fear-crazed dreams, a few lines about his sister and a list of the vegetables and fruit trees that he meant to plant in some Hesperidean farm when he escaped to safety."

There were conflicts, too, between groups which could not provoke poetry; until they changed from personal intrigues to political forces. Writers had hopes in the future of Australia, but their present was with Britain, not Australia. For many years dualism persisted; in the upper and middle classes longer than among the workers, Britain was their joy and their right, Australia was for posterity or for the people.

LLOYD ROSS.

This article is the first of a series by Dr. Lloyd Ross on authors who influenced the social struggle in Australia.

## NEW NOVELS

### PASTORAL SYMPHONY

An Australian novel which first made its appearance in 1939, "Pastoral Symphony" has just been re-issued by Dymocks.

In a note at the beginning of his novel, J. J. Hardie writes: ". . . I discussed with my publishers the possibility of a novel that would cover the pastoral side of Australian History. . . . but . . . I came to the conclusion that the history of the evolution of the merino sheep and the cattle

in Australia lay in the story of its people."

The human side of this novel is concerned with the story of two runaway convicts, John Sim and Ann Smith, who drive off cattle brought out in the First Fleet, and in seclusion breed from the a large herd.

Suspense is sustained by the continual threat to the runaways of recapture, with its inevitable sequel. As exploration proceeds, they are forced to move their home and their cattle farther into the unknown bush.

One son of the escapees develops an interest in sheep-breeding—he acquires both his knowledge and his sheep by unorthodox means from Macarthur and the Reverend Samuel Marsden. A sense of the expansion of settlement, and of the growing wool industry, is built up mainly from scraps of news which reach the outcast family.

Eventually the sons Mark and John become two of the earliest settlers on the Murrumbidgee. The author recreates the stirring times when selection was taking place ever farther out and the grim period of the Hungry Forties, when a collapse in wool prices bankrupted many squatters, who drifted with blasted hopes back to the young city of Sydney.

This is a good robust story of the squatting age. The little subtlety in characterisation is compensated by the vitality of the action, and by glimpses of the free and easy life of those early days.

Mark becomes a wealthy squatter, renowned for his fine sheep, still goes barefoot, even in the city itself. His brother, Jack, selects his stud meticulously—from his neighbours' herds—then proves that all is above board by ear-marking his cattle. His exclusive ear-mark is a lopping off of the top half of the animal's ear.

The historical background to this story of pastoral development is skilfully suggested by the author. He has been able to pack a great deal of information about this most interesting period of our history into his 300 pages, but at the same time has succeeded in holding the interest in the lives of his characters. It is fortunate

that this book has been reprinted, so that it may reach a wider public.

"Pastoral Symphony" by J. J. Hardie Dymocks. Our copy from Verity Hewitt, City, Canberra. Price 9/.

—H.J.H.

## STUDY IN MATURITY

"Two Names Upon the Shore" by Susan Ertz is the story of Mary Hallam, "a poor little rich girl," and her search for emotional and personal maturity.

She is portrayed as a young adult who, through an accident to her hand, has been prevented from following the career of pianist which was her only means of self-expression.

Mary suffers from a strong sense of inferiority, which is not helped by the unloving supervision of her step-mother, Letty, who is intent on seeing that Mary marries satisfactorily, that is, a man with a good income and social position.

A vivid contrast is drawn between Mary and her stepmother, the former being quite uninterested in the material and social triumphs of the world and the latter unable to see that any aim existed but the satisfaction of her desires.

The first "name upon the shore" is, of course, Mary's, and one could be forgiven for thinking the second one was Letty's. But two-thirds of the way through the book Mary meets Alan Garstin, whom she later marries and through whom she reaches a height of development quite unforeseen in the earlier portrayal.

There is an expressive description of Mary when, after six years of separation from her father, she returns to his home when he is ill:

"Her father watching her, thought he would scarcely have known her. The pallid, delicate girl had put on weight, roundness, ripeness. She had colour, animation. . . . That she envied no one, hated no one, feared no one, was in her calm eyes. They saw, the two who explored her face with such intentness, that she had been re-born, that the girl they had known was now buried deep, and that Mary Garstin had unbelievably improved upon and added to Mary Hallam."

The portraits of the minor characters are vivid, but the author has a tendency to draw people as too unrelievedly black or white.

"Two Names Upon the Shore," by Susan Ertz. London: Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., 1947. Our copy from Verity Hewitt, City, Canberra. Price 10/6.

—B.E.I.

## NEW ENGLISH PUBLICATIONS

*To the Bitter End*, by Hans Bernd Gisevius (Jonathan Cape).

This book, written by an ex-Gestapo member who subsequently became one of the group of Germans who plotted to remove Hitler, tells of the unceasing, if apparently, fruitless efforts of the German resistance movement.

Further authentication of Gisevius's story is supplied in a Foreword by Mr. Allen W. Dulles, chief of the American Office of Strategic Services in Bern, who made contact with Gisevius there as early as January, 1943.

*The Mediterranean*, by Andre Siegfried (Jonathan Cape).

Professor Siegfried wrote this book because in spite of the changes in modern methods of warfare, "once war is declared, command of the Mediterranean becomes a vital necessity to each of the belligerents."

The author writes: "The Mediterranean is a civilisation, and it is also a highway. Finally, it is one of the regions in which political tempests arise, gain momentum, and burst forth. To-day it is more than ever necessary to know the Mediterranean, and above all to understand it." His book is therefore a history of the Mediterranean and its peoples, and of the civilisations which grew and dwindled there.

*The Desolate Market*, by John Cousins (Jonathan Cape).

This novel, "only incidentally a war story," tells the story of Bill Rowland, navigator of a plane forced down in the desert. Rowland has always found himself wavering at moments of decision because he is immobilised by conflicting purposes and loyalties. These affect his relationship to his crew and to the wife he adores. His experiences in the desert, and his rescue by an old Arab, provide him with some kind of answer to his personal problems.

*Mariner Dances*, by P. H. Newby (Jonathan Cape).

This novel is the third work of the author of "A Journey to the Interior" and "Agents and Witnesses," which were well received by the critics.

It is the story of an abduction, though not in the romantic manner of the eighteenth century. Mariner is an unscrupulous egoist with the very best of motives. He abducts Mary a girl of nineteen, and imposes himself and Mary upon the family of a friend. The novel deals with the effect of the intrusion on the various members of his friend's family.

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