

N.A.D.O.C. Writing Quest, 1961

MORE SUPPORT NEEDED

N.A.D.O.C. Writing Quest, 1961, provides much food for serious thought for all of us who, voluntarily or otherwise, accept the privileges and responsibilities of working towards assimilation of our aborigines.

It is obvious that where the greatest encouragement is given, the most enthusiastic co-operation results.

In New South Wales, where the aboriginal people are encouraged to read and send contributions to *Dawn*, their own literary magazine, we had entries from individual readers acting entirely upon their own initiative. With the approval of the Aborigines' Welfare Board, we requested the editor to publish the conditions relating to the quest. It is hoped that at least one of these contestants, who displayed such independence and ambition may feel confident to continue making full use of her bursary and eventually succeed in attending a university. This would now be possible by means of the "Abschool" scholarships made available to aborigines by students of to-day.

There can be no doubt that most of the teachers who received particulars of the Writing Quest this year *did not encourage the pupils in their charge to participate*. There may have been very good reasons for this but a quotation from a letter, written by a teacher at an aboriginal school, is eloquent testimony to the contrary: ". . . I apologise for not being more co-operative in the past . . . not for the sake of the prize—but to help the 'cause' along. That my pupils won so many places is a reflection on us teachers. We all tend to leave it to the 'other fellow' . . ."

Mr. Colin Davis, Editor of *Dawn*, who judged the essays again this year, expressed disappointment that there were not more entries, especially from New South Wales. That he found a certain "sameness" in some age groups may indicate that a wider choice of subjects may be desirable. The entries from adults in all sections of the quest was extremely gratifying. Their work was excellent.

Mr. Donald McLean, of the Department of Education, who judged the stories again this year remarked: ". . . It is noticeable that the standard of composition is much higher when the writers have topics near to their hearts and their origins." At Mr. McLean's suggestion, a section for true or fictitious stories based on aboriginal life or lore was included this year. Some valuable contributions resulted concerning tribal customs and beliefs.

Although the poetry section received less entries than last year, two of the successful poets have given us a remarkable demonstration of the versatility and adaptability of our aboriginal writers.

The first prize was awarded for a poem which, in the opinion of the judge, Mr. D. McGrath, Headmaster of La Perouse Public School: ". . . is frankly influenced by Paterson and Lawson but is direct and unaffected. There is a ring of genuine feeling for the outback way of life."

Another prize-winning poem was written by a full-blood aboriginal girl from Arnhem Land. It shows a remarkable resemblance in style and expression to the work of the great ancient poets of her race. For centuries their verse has been kept alive by song men. Recently some of it has been translated by R. M. Berndt. Here is a quotation from a classic:—

"That sun rises above us, burning our backs, going to the Place of the Sun.

It burns our backs, and it shines upon the water at Lilildjang.

Its warm rays touch us, stretching to Arnhem Bay."

For comparison, here is a poem written this year at Roper River Mission, by Valmai Rogers (15):—

AT SUNRISE

"When the sun rises up from the back of Walmudga,
Beautiful rays shine upon our windows,
And out among the silver water edges,
And shine upon the River beds of the Roper."

Surely it is not too optimistic to believe that the time is not far distant when the aboriginal people will achieve happy and masterful familiarity with the English language, which at present is still foreign to so many of them. Then perhaps, a true Australian culture will emerge and poets and authors will seek inspiration from the classics of Australian folk lore, just as naturally as they write today of the comparatively recent adventures of the real or mythical heroes and heroines of Ancient Greece. These future writers could shed light on lost worlds of culture and open up new vistas for the delight of unborn generations who will travel, like Keats: ". . . In realms of gold".

ESME SPEIGHT

(Convenor of N.A.D.O.C.
Writing Quest, 1961.)