



A remarkable Press on show

Adventure and Art, exhibition at the National Library of New Zealand, Wellington, curated by Noel Waite

Noel Waite, *Adventure and Art*, The Caxton Press, Preface by Peter Simpson, National Library, Wellington, 1988, \$13.50

IN A SPLENDID EXHIBITION at the National Library on the Caxton Press an intriguing wartime letter from Denis Glover to Leo Bensemann in Christchurch, starts: 'I've met Stanley Morison and a nice fellow he is'. Morison, doyen of English typographers and famed for his designing of Times Roman, thus revitalising the layout of that distinguished national monument, was extremely hospitable to the young Glover and guided him to other eminent and stimulating figures of the printing and publishing world notably John Johnson, Printer to Oxford University. Glover's contact with such outstanding personalities – he was then in the Royal Navy – influenced and permeated his subsequent career, so that the Caxton Press maintained the traditions of the best of European typography allied to the quirkiness, zest and originality of its guiding lights, Denis himself and Leo Bensemann. High tribute is

paid to the latter in this exhibition by its curator Noel Waite who has also written an absorbing booklet *Adventure and Art: The Caxton Press* which shows how Caxton achieved a balance between commercial viability and artistic excellence. It follows the format and style of the earlier Blackwood & Janet Paul exhibition in the same venue under the rubric of 'Landmarks in New Zealand Publishing'. It is to be hoped that such displays will become a regular feature of the National Library and progressively illustrate the history of fine printing and publishing in New Zealand.

Meantime, here could be seen a bounty of influential books, such as the first J.K. Baxter volumes, *Beyond the Palisade* and *Blow Wind of Fruitfulness*; the Curnow anthology of New Zealand verse; *Landfall Country* and Ann Westra's controversial *Washday at the Pa*. As exemplars of design we have Janet Frame's *The Lagoon*, Milton's

Areopagitica, the Mervyn Taylor wood engravings, Caxton's own type specimen books, Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Lilburn's *Four Preludes for Piano*, Ruth Dallas's *The Turning Wheel* (a Bensemann design) and many others.

It would be admirable if Noel Waite's booklet could be followed by a history of the Caxton Press, imaginatively illustrated. Perhaps even a book of Caxton typography is called for, including a selection of *Landfall* covers. The spirit of the Press (which permeates the booklet) is well illustrated in another letter from Denis Glover to Leo Bensemann written on 28 February 1943. Frank Sargeson qualified for a royalty on a reprint of one of his publications of 'at least 3d a book and possibly 4d. This must be paid. (He's probably damned poor at the moment)'.

J.E.P. Thomson's monograph *Denis Glover* (1977) in the 'New Zealand Writers and their work' series, published by Oxford University Press is a good complement to the exhibition and its publication. As is Gordon Ogilvie's vivid depiction of Glover in volume 4 of *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* (1998). ☞

