Schroder, Bethell, and The Press: a correction to The Oxford Companion

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As the entry in The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature rightly observes, the Christchurch daily newspaper The Press played a significant role in fostering New Zealand literature from as early as the 1860s (when it published material by Samuel Butler), but more especially in the years following the First World War, and well into the 1930s and 1940s. However, one small correction needs to be made to that entry.

Although Ursula Bethell did publish a number of poems in The Press, she was not recruited by M. C. Keane, as is stated on p. 451, and nor was her poem ‘The Long Harbour’ published under his editorship, as the paragraph implies. Bethell's connection with the paper began slightly later, when J. H. E. Schroder edited the literary page, and the paper was under the relatively short-lived editorship of Oliver Duff.

The relationship was initiated by Schroder's very favourable — if rather belated — review of From a Garden in the Antipodes (18 July, 1931),¹ which prompted a letter of thanks from Bethell (21 July, 1931), who felt that Schroder was ‘the first reviewer ... to hear and see things as I did when writing.’ Although Bethell had written promptly enough after the appearance of the review, it must have been a considered decision, for it required her, as she expressed it, ‘to waive anonymity’. From a Garden in the Antipodes had, of course, been published under the pseudonym of Evelyn Hayes. Not only was she glad of the recognition, but she was equally aware of the publicity value of the review, and surmised that it might ‘cheer up’ her publisher, Frank Sidgwick, (to whom she promised to send a copy), for, as she observed, ‘the times are nebulous & publication of verse a risky venture’.

Schroder replied (somewhat tardily) in turn (4 September, 1931), ending his letter: 'I wonder if I may, without impertinence, add that I should very much like to see some of your verses in The Press'. Bethell soon began sending poems to Schroder, and like Robin Hyde sometimes sought his advice about individual words and lines. The first of her poems in The Press were ‘Picnic’, printed on 7 November, and ‘November’ printed on the 21st of that month. That these were indeed Bethell’s first contributions to The Press seems to be confirmed by her surprised response, communicated to Schroder in a letter of 19 December, at the receipt of a cheque for “£1/11/6 as remuneration for the two poems: she wrote that she had ‘thought poetry in the “Press” was for honour and glory —

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but not… I find a very charming bit of pink printed matter, on which I meditate with surprise and satisfaction’.

‘The Long Harbour’ did not appear for another year. The manuscript was enclosed in a letter to Schroder dated 17 November, 1932 and the poem was printed the following month. By that time, Duff had also left to become editor of the North Canterbury Gazette (to which Bethell also submitted poems for publication), and The Press was then under the editorship of Pierce Freeth.

Work Cited


Endnotes

1 The correspondence between J. H. E. Schroder and Ursula Bethell is presently being edited by Charlotte Elder as an MA thesis. Her research has supplied the dates of Schroder’s review and of the publication of Bethell’s poems. Bethell’s letters are held in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington; Schroder’s are in the Macmillan Brown Library in Christchurch.