

Seeing the light of day: J.H.E. Schroder's broadcast review of *Day and Night*.

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John Schroder was one of the most influential figures of the Christchurch literary scene in the 1930's. As literary editor of *The Press*, he assembled a Saturday literary page that featured many of the names that were to prove significant to New Zealand literature in the years that followed, among them Ngaio Marsh and Robin Hyde. One of Schroder's goals as compiler of the page was to actively encourage emerging writers, and one way in which he facilitated this process was through reviewing recent publications. It was in this capacity as reviewer that he first encountered the work of little-known Christchurch poet Ursula Bethell, at that time writing under the pseudonym of Evelyn Hayes.

Schroder was sent a copy of Bethell's first collection, *From a Garden in the Antipodes*, in 1931. His subsequent review of the book, in *The Press* on 18 July 1931, displayed an understanding and appreciation of Bethell's work. He quoted widely from the volume and identified 'vividness of phrase', an 'exhilarating quickness of mind' and 'a corresponding range and suppleness of feeling' (Schroder, 'Trivia' 13) among other characteristics of Bethell's poems. Bethell's delight at such a positive response to her work quickly got the better of her natural shyness and 'Victorian dislike of publicity' (27 Sep. 1933).¹ Only three days after the review appeared, she wrote directly to Schroder to thank him, although she was quick to claim the excuse of Geoffrey Alley's encouragement. When he reciprocated with a reply that concluded: 'I wonder if I may without impertinence add that I should very much like to see some of your verses in *The Press*', a literary relationship began that was to span the next fifteen years, proving mutually enriching to both correspondents, and drawing Bethell's poetry to the attention of the New Zealand population at large.

Bethell's first poem in *The Press*, 'Picnic', was printed on 7 November 1931 and was followed by a further twenty-two poems during the next eight years. Publication of her work in such a well-regarded medium brought her a wider readership than she might have otherwise attracted, making possible the publication of a further two collections in her lifetime, *Time and Place* in 1936 and *Day and Night* in 1939. The letters between Schroder and Bethell during

¹ The letters from Bethell to Schroder are held in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington; all those addressed to Bethell are in the MacMillan Brown Library in Christchurch. Subsequent references are by date within the body of the article.

this period demonstrate that Schroder's role in the relationship was often one of literary mentor, offering advice on the selection of poems as well as the mechanics of publishing in New Zealand. Although he rarely gave intrusive critical judgement on Bethell's work, (unlike her less inhibited correspondents such as D'Arcy Cresswell), he was nevertheless always happy to offer supportive and encouraging critical feedback on the poems sent to him for consideration.

Despite his continuing encouragement of local writers such as Bethell, Schroder was not universally celebrated for his critical judgement and support for the development of New Zealand literature during his own lifetime. He was one of the editors, along with Alan Mulgan and C.A. Marris, who had been targeted in Glover's satirical 'Short Reflection of the Present State of Literature in this Country' as 'literary antediluvians', representative of the outdated colonial attitude to literature in New Zealand. Charles Brasch echoed this non-support for Schroder's critical abilities when he wrote to Bethell with regard to a series of tribute articles for Robin Hyde in *The Press*. The articles had been written after Hyde's suicide in 1939, and having read them, Brasch confided to Bethell: '[it] would appear that he has no judgement at all; I am not surprised; his seemed to me a timid mind, afraid of ideas - though a kind man.' (16 Aug. 1940) However, these assessments of Schroder's ability were at odds with other contemporary perceptions, not the least of which was Bethell's. In her introductory letter to Schroder she described him as 'the first reviewer ... who, like Mr Frank Sidgwick [publisher of *From a Garden in the Antipodes*] himself, appears to hear and see things as I did when writing!' (21 July 1931) As the following review demonstrates, Schroder's empathetic critical response to Bethell's poetry displayed an understanding that illuminated both the woman and the work, and this distinguished him from others at a time when 'reviewing generally was not much above the level of film criticism, producing little more than blurbs' (Holcroft 48).

Schroder produced this review of Bethell's third collection, *Day and Night*, for 3YA radio, the Canterbury station of the National Broadcasting Service. It was broadcast on 31 October 1939. Schroder had held a regular book review slot on 3YA for some time, although, as one of Bethell's correspondents pointed out, 'he very rarely [gave] the whole time at his disposal to one book' (Williamson, undated [Nov. 1939]). Bethell herself did not hear the review, but was sent a copy subsequently by Oliver Duff, who commented that Schroder 'had done the job not merely well but supremely well' (9 Nov. 1939). Her own reaction to the review is catalogued in a letter to Schroder (19 Nov. 1939) where she exclaims (her own rather idiosyncratic punctuation is preserved in the quotation):

Its so well arranged, so succinct, says so much to the point in a given time. I am so glad that you took the landscape line of approach - just right for the purpose I think, and that you seized the occasion to preach the gospel of true patriotism - what you say makes me almost sorry that I wasn't born in N.Z.! tho' it has been no affectation in me to be wont to call England "Home". Childhood however was spent in Canterbury & that must count. It is a happiness to be told that it has been allowed me to give back a little of the excitement & happiness that the landscape has brought to me on coming back to it. I wish I'd had a suitable unpublished one to offer to the centennial, but I hadn't.

You justify the title & the arrangement - both of which cost me some pains - And you find more in the book than I saw was there! - that is criticism to "prop one's mind" And thank you for making time to read a whole long poem - two even - and, three short ones as well! - that gives a much better notion I think than bits. It interests me that one was the spring morning which I added diffidently as an after-thought, feeling that it was perhaps too crudely ecstatic.

And what a splendid advertisement the exordium was for my wares! As a matter of fact I hate offering them for sale, but it's the only way - Thank you for it all.

This review has never been published since its initial broadcast in 1939. The extant copy from which this transcript was taken exists among Schroder's papers held in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington (fMS 018). It is relevant and timely that it should be given a second airing here, as Schroder's review presents a contemporary response to Bethell's work by one of her colleagues that discusses not only the poetry, but also the context of its composition. It establishes both Bethell and Schroder as writers who were concerned with the development of literature relating to a specifically New Zealand environment. [The poems from which Schroder quotes are identified in square brackets on those occasions on which he does not name them. The two long poems he read are not reproduced here.]

Day and Night

Broadcast Talk by J.H.E. Schroder

I am going to say something about a small book published in Christchurch last week by the Caxton Press: "*Day and Night*". If you look on the title-page you will see it described as "Poems written between 1924 and 1934 by the Author of "*Time and Place*". Look up "*Time and Place*", then, another book of poems, issued by the Caxton Press in 1936, and on the title page you read,

"Time and Place: Poems by the author of *'From a Garden in the Antipodes'*". And when you trace that book - deeply, keenly delightful - you will find that the author is named as Evelyn Hayes.... And that was an assumed name. The secret isn't a close one. The author lives in Christchurch; many know who she is. But if a poet chooses not to give her name to print, then it ought not to be given here. I mention these facts because it's awkward to keep on saying "the author of this poem," or something like that, and because I had rather hark back to the name she used in 1929, and say "Evelyn Hayes", or "E.H." Those initials were signed to some of the poems in this book when they appeared in *"The Press"*. Also I mention these facts because they wrap up something that is important to the poems: they are not only poems written in Canterbury; they are poems that spring out of Canterbury; they have to be seen and felt against a Canterbury background of landscape, life, climate, and light; and it isn't a small part of the response to them to recognise that they are, according to E.H.'s sense and spirit, a response to our own intimate environment. To recognise that, with pleasure, and with pride, isn't parochialism; it's the essence of patriotism ... which means cherishing the land you inherit. And that isn't done without thought and emotion that strike and attach themselves deeper than the surfaces and the obvious self-advertisements of place.

I think I have said before, here, that the chief reason why New Zealand is still looking for the novel and the poem that will express it is because it is looking for the wrong sort of thing, and not looking for the right thing where it is. The wrong sort of thing is the sort of poem which sets out to make a description and a catalogue: "There you are, that's New Zealand! Oh, how beautiful! Oh, how marvellous! Oh, how we love it!" There are poems like that: I can't remember a good one. They try for too much, and they try the wrong way. Mind, I don't say it can't be done: you could find poems, or pieces of poems, in English literature, which seem to do it, though they're rare. But in nearly the whole range of English poetry, and of the rich and wide best that it has to offer in praise and love and picture of England, I think it is true that the scene, whatever it is, has called forth a mood and a movement of feeling or started some thought that travels beyond it, though not out of sight, and that the scene becomes in this way the background of the poem, its cause, not its theme, the inspiration, not the substance. All those landscapes in Tennyson's "In Memoriam", for instance, are incidental: they are there because the process of Tennyson's reflective or passionate grief took this turn or that in sight of them, and from sight of them, and can't be expressed without recalling them, as they belong to it. And I think this is true, all the way. Why, then, don't we look for the true poetry about New Zealand where we shall find it - not in self-conscious, rhetorical addresses to something dumped down heavily as the subject for an ode - but in the good poetry we have, of which New Zealand

is not so much the subject as the source? We shall find New Zealand there, often in a line or two: like these, where you hear it:

"And far-off nagging of dogs obeying trade-bound drover
Very early afoot on some hill-winding road."

['Nor-West Night']

The three books by Evelyn Hayes are full of poems that are New Zealand; more exactly, are Canterbury. At the same time, they are much more, just as "The Scholar Gypsy" is much more than lovely glimpses of Oxford landscape. Are we so greedy that we won't be satisfied until a poem is New Zealand - or Canterbury - and nothing else? That's parochial and that's stupid; and if that's what we want, we shall have the rewards of parochial and stupid people: we shall set up our own stupid images in art, and the world will have a good laugh at them and at us. I hope to heaven the Centennial literary competitions don't make the laugh a historic one - "to resound for ages." - But Evelyn Hayes. This is three miles away, perhaps:

Early in the morning I stood pondering
Intricate interchange of shadow on the dreaming hills.
Soluble colour, moss-green by purple-grey penetrated,
Brown into blue turning, brief gleam of gorse gliding
Softened solidity of sheep-sustaining access,
Of water-fashioned gully soft decline.

['Rainy Morning']

Or another fragment:

The morning air was full of the cries of humanity active,
red sparks rising up to the whiter light of silence
the eternal mountains, aloof, maintained their endless
procession;
like tender bloom on curve of immature peach-skin
clung fugitive frost to the foot of winter-green gullies;
shone, sun-glossed gold and silver, the satiny tussock...

I kissed the chains that bind the body to bounty of earthly scene.

['Morning Walk']

Don't fancy that the New Zealand poem, New Zealand poetry, has to be stuffed with the names of native trees, plants and birds, or otherwise stickered and labelled as our own cabin cargo. Property - and propriety - need not be so ostentatious or so jealous, in art. Don't prick up your ears intelligently at the mention of a tussock: it isn't the word that's significant, but the sight of the thing: the early sunshine -

"Playing upon polished new-sprung leaves,
 Playing on subtle-shadowed tussock bosses,
 And stippled spring-grassed slopes of gorse-trimmed hills."
 ['Out on a spring Morning']

Let me read the whole poem from which these lines come: "tussock" is the only label word in it - but you will have seen all this, some morning, on the Port Hills, and will know that it can have no other home:

Oh let me not forget, under grey skies repatriated,
 Returned to grey, time-patinated towns,
 Not forget, then, this scintillant early sunshine
 Playing upon polished new-sprung leaves,
 Playing on subtle-shadowed tussock bosses
 And stippled spring-grassed slopes of gorse-trimmed hills,
 Giving to plain-spread dwellings definition,
 Lighting to emerald willow-bordered fields,
 Painting lapis-lazuli the wandering mountains,
 Shining to diamonds the far mountain-snows.

I may forget the bees' insistent bourdon
 In the willow-flower by the river, the earthy smell,
 Alien lark's carol, little native's sweet da-capo,
 Joyous scents of clover, wattle, furze;
 But let me not forget, but lifelong be recorded
 Upon my registering eyes' memorial screen
 This brilliancy of green, blue, white, and again blue,
 The Spring-purged sky's dazzle,
 The first sun's brightness, the golden lightness,
 This glitter, this glory, this morning jubilee.
 ['Out on a Spring Morning']

Here is another fragment, which has its label but does not rely upon it:

Gaol-breakers from routine, we halted our four-cylindrical
 trusty and time-worn chariot upon a yielding greensward
 beside the ransom shingle of a sequestered by-path
 through land half-unredeemed and half-subdued by settlers,
 and with the sweet perfume of lawless gorse invested,
 upleaning to the wall of tawny, rock-strewn Port Hills.

Untroubled, slow milch-kine, with prizeworthy rich udders,
 behind us nuzzled softly among man-selected grasses
 in the shadow of a tree-dark, wind-forbidding hill-spur;
 and we looked upon a piece of planted orchard, spring-green,
 sunlit, sheltered, where, a procession of bridesmaids,

twelve young quince-trees quivered their blossom-sprinkled
garlands. [‘Picnic’]

But I should like to go further. These poems are New Zealand poems because, in what is I think a quite unique way, they capture the New Zealand light and its effects:

The great south wind has covered with cloud the whole of the
river-plain,
soft white ocean of foaming mist, blotting out, billowing
fast to the east, where Pacific main surges on vaster bed.

But here, on the hills, south wind unvapoured encounters the
sunshine
lacing and interlocking, the invisible effervescence
you almost hear, and the laughter of light and air at play
overhead.

Seabirds fly free - see the sharp flash of their underwings!
and high lifted up to the north, the mountains, the mighty, the
white ones
rising sheer from the cloudy sea, light-crowned, established.
[‘Southerly Sunday’]

You will remember that the title of this book is "*Day and Night*" - itself insisting on a recurrence that you will find in the poems: the recurrence of an inspiration found in the coming of light, the growing and flooding and triumph of it, the dying of it in darkness, and the light that is born of darkness and lives in it. Again and again, in light and dark and their effects, sometimes realistically, sometimes symbolically used, you find the origin and the making of these poems. But what I want to press, a little, is the narrower suggestion that Evelyn Hayes has gone directly to a characteristic of New Zealand that even the painters have been slow to discover and develop: the strength and brilliance of the New Zealand light. And if you read these poems with your eyes open, you will see that the quality of their landscapes owes far more to light and its colour-creation than to forms. Did you notice, I wonder, when I was reading the poem called "Out on a Spring Morning," that she gave a key to this special delight of hers in pure vision? Sound and scent she would resign, or forget:

I may forget the bees' insistent bourden
In the willow-flower by the river, the earthy smell, Alien lark's
carol, little native's sweet da-capo,
Joyous scents of clover, wattle, furze;

But let me not forget, but lifelong be recorded
 Upon my registering eyes' memorial screen
 This brilliancy of green, blue, white, and again blue,
 The Spring-purged sky's dazzle,
 The first sun's brightness, the golden lightness,
 This glitter, this glory, this morning jubilee.

And then you will turn, perhaps, to "Candour", a poem which shows this delight in radiance, almost as a quality detached from what it may make visible:

Everything was white this morning.
 White mists wandered all about the river-bed,
 Grey clouds, light-infused, conveyed the morning,
 Covering with whiteness the wide sky overhead.

White, past belief, the high and snowy mountains,
 Phantom-like, visionary; whiteness upon whiteness
 Of frozen foam from far celestial fountains
 Suffused with soft and universal brightness.

Everything was white, this morning,
 Untroubled, luminous and tranquil pure;
 Bright as an affianced bride, adorning
 Herself with white upon the plighted morning;
 Past all debate, all hazard, still, and sure.

Now I have to return to something I said first: that the poet who is to tell us most truly and beautifully what New Zealand is like will do so indirectly, and because the looks and ways of the land have bent the poet to themes that exceed but still need them:

"In the Ark of thought I abide,
 Lattice-wrought of experience,"

['Night Rain']

Says "E.H."

I shall illustrate what I meant by reading one longish poem in full. You will see how wide and noble a picture it holds, not only of the characteristic Canterbury farm scene, but of its long building, by aeonial natural forces, by generation upon generation of labour; and then, please note that all that was written because the poet had moved on to thought of the age-old earth and of human destiny:

[Reads whole of 'Spring on the Plain']

That is a true centennial poem. I hope we may have its equal to earn the prize. Perhaps we shall. But I shall think it a miracle if we are given one that equals the even better poem which Evelyn Hayes called "The Long Harbour", translating the Maori word Akaroa. It does not appear in "*Day and Night*"; it was in "*Time and Place*".

[Reads whole of 'The Long Harbour']

New Zealand's history has no more beautiful garland than that from the hands of the poets.

One thing I shall add. I have deliberately confined myself to one line of approach to these poems. Do not think I have given, or attempted, a complete account of them, or set out their full praise.

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