

A COMMONWEALTH OF LITERATURES

THE IDEA OF A COMMONWEALTH of literatures, paralleling the political Commonwealth, gathers substance from the kind of writing which is now being published in the countries that formerly belonged to the Empire. The pattern, which was examined in a volume of essays—*The Commonwealth Pen*—noticed some issues ago in these pages, is deepened by the growing differentiation as well as the growing achievement of writers working and publishing outside the literary metropolis of London. Thirty years ago anthologies of verse from the Empire had a curiously blimpish tone and a foggy mediocrity that made Charles G. D. Roberts and Adam Lindsay Gordon look like considerable poets. The situation has changed radically in a generation, and a recent collection like Margaret J. O'Donnell's *Anthology of Commonwealth Verse*, distributed in Canada by Ryerson Press, leaves one with the conviction that, since last war's end at least, the English-writing poets of Canada and Australia, of South Africa and New Zealand, are competing on equal ground with those of Britain. In fact, when one reads the tired, dusty verses of the English poets of the 1950's "Movement", it seems evident that nowadays Canadians and New Zealanders at least are singing with truer poetic voices.

An anthology bringing together a number of literatures, using variants of a common language, is always a difficult project, and Miss O'Donnell's collection is saved mainly by the intrinsic merit of the better verse it includes. In planning and arrangement the anthologist has made most of the possible mistakes, so that her collection can at least on one level be read as a manual of examples of what not to do. She starts with the early Victorian age, when no colonial literature was other than derivative, and the result is that poor old Heavyside and Sangster and their contemporaries elsewhere are made to perform beside Wordsworth, Browning and Clare. On the other hand, the attempt to be fair by containing English

poetry in spatial limits equal to those devoted to other countries means that the anthology appears without most of the best English voices of the period covered — Byron, Shelley, Keats, etc. etc.

It would surely have been better to have restricted the anthology to a period — say the last thirty years — in which the various Commonwealth literatures, including the British, could have been presented on something approaching equal terms. But instead Miss O'Donnell has tried to extricate herself from the difficulties created by the legion of British poets writing during the past century by dividing them into English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish, using place of birth as the main criterion of selection. This has led to some curious combinations — and divisions. Since MacNeice and Day Lewis are presented as Irish and Auden and Spender as English, the Thirties movement is split down the middle and half its leading figures appear in the odd company of Padraic Colum and James Stephens. Those delightful nature poets of the English countryside, Andrew Young and Edward Thomas, are presented respectively as Scottish and Welsh poets, though Wilfred Owen, who was born much nearer to Wales than Edward Thomas, is mysteriously classed as English. The fact is that, except for clearly regional poets like Huw Menai in Wales and Hugh MacDiarmid in Scotland, most of the writers represented in the British sections of the book came together in the inclusive atmosphere of the London literary world; they formed that world. Miss O'Donnell recognizes the irrelevance of origins in such circumstances when she includes T. S. Eliot among the English; but she does not carry the implications of this sensible decision to their logical conclusion.

But outside Britain origins do take on meaning. Poets living out their lives away from Europe, enjoying local experiences, speaking with local accents in local variants of the common language, slowly produce their own idioms, and we can observe their distinctive poetic traditions emerging, New Zealand developing a characteristic strain of nature-sensitive lyricism, and Canada producing — to its own surprise — the most sophisticated verse of all during these last years, varying from the ironically astringent to the metaphysically involuted.

The kind of rapid sampling survey which such a volume permits is enough to point up some interesting facts about poets in the Commonwealth. One can note, for instance, how deeply poetry depends on the writer using a native language spoken from childhood. The least satisfying poems in the volume are those by Indians, Pakistanis and Africans, and this comparative failure in verse is given particular point when one remembers how many good English-writing novelists India, for example, has produced. No Indian poet stands so high among con-

temporary writers in English as prose writers like R. K. Narayan, Aubrey Menen and Mulk Raj Anand.

And then there is the curious case of South Africa, which for decades has been sprouting excellent writers from among its English-speaking population, yet has never produced a really characteristic local literature for the reason that the good South African poets all seem to find their way as quickly as possible to London, where they have taken over the rôle of the brilliant expatriate once reserved for the Anglo-Irish. Roy Campbell, William Plomer, Charles Madge, R. N. Currey, F. T. Prince, David Wright; it is astonishing how many of them have fled from home and how few have gone back. Obviously the social stresses and strains that exist in a country like South Africa are not conducive to continued literary creation, and those writers who are wise escape to fulfil their literary destinies elsewhere. Perhaps there is a warning here for Canadians — both French and English — that a country too sharply divided against itself may be culturally no more healthy than it is politically.

