economic-human being: these are the charges which spark Goh's poetry. And how many of us who write poetry would like to consummate so much in a single, concluding stanza?

My wife calls; dinner is ready. I pour out all my poetry and asked when I would write one for her. She should know she matters more to me than all my poetry / think you would understand that, my old grey-haired Tu Fu'

FORGETTABLE MEMOIR


The memoir has an important place in literature; without Aubrey, Walton, Spence, Viszelly, Pearse Smith, Anthony Wood, Johnson, Lockhart, Rogers, or Trelawny our understanding of the past would be poorer, our affection for its writers diminished.

Dan Davin's Closing Times is drawn from, and rather ruthlessly cashes in on, its intimacy with seven friends, revealing a little more than we knew before but still too much — about Maclaren-Ross, Thomas, and the slightly preposterous Miss Starkie. Information on Cary, Rodgers, and Manger is more welcome simply because they are more interesting people. However, what marks these recollections out from most literary memoirs is that we are told as much about their author as about their friends.

We haven't got very far into the book before we discover that Mr Davin is a New Zealander (Otago University) who went on to Oxford in the thirties, had a distinguished career in the NZ Division (ending up as a major) in Egypt, Greece, and Italy, and attractive to women, courageous in the face of danger — as would be expected of an ex Rugby (sorry, Rugger) player — and generous to his many brilliant, if needy friends (several hundred of whose names are nonchalantly dropped) has written verse and novels of which the critics think highly, is a laosed Catholic of Irish descent and a great talker, has a charming wife, Winnie, and three equally charming daughters, Anna, Della, and Bridget, some of whose infant observations are recounted for posterity. He also thinks that North Auckland is a "hot, soft place" compared with his rugged South Island birthplace, and has been employed by the Oxford University Press for some years.

Like Louis MacNeice (and the NZ Herald's "Grammaticus", with whose style Mr Davin's has something in common) he read Greats and "can speak in all kinds of classical allusion. For the man who has read Latin and Greek in our time is like the bearer of secret prohibited knowledge." Armed with this secret prohibited knowledge, Mr Davin was wont to foray, if I may use his slightly mannered language, at the Black Horse, the Wheatsheaf, the Dover Castle, the Marquis of Granby, the Bricklayer's Arms, the Fitzroy, the George, the Highlander, the Stag's Head, or any of the dozen other pubs whose names are liberally sprinkled throughout the text, with Nina (Hammett, of course), Augustus (John, right), Dylan, Louis, Pat rick, Bertie, and the rest of his fellow barflies, for a couple of years.

Mr Davin may be a shrewd and perspicacious publisher (I understand that he has occasionally found work at the Press for needy New Zealanders) and even a passable novelist, but he certainly has a gift for the sort of self-promotion that misses few chances of reminding us what a brood of a boy he is. For someone plugging doggedly away in his mid-sixties the cultivation of an undergraduate "hearty" image seems strangely immature — until it is remembered how often bright boys from Irish colonial families conform to a similar pattern. Sometimes they turn up in New Zealand university faculties and if they don't add up to a great deal there they don't do all that much harm either on reflection, perhaps they deserve to be encouraged, within limits, for the touch of extravagance or absurdity they lend to the dreary provincial scene.

Nobody ever hears about their sisters! Perhaps they become nuns.

For $1295 this may not be the dullest collection of literary pot-house chitchat ever published but the price does seem rather high; nor is the book helped by an unusually inept dust-jacket design.
remarkably authentic, taut, colloquial, yet subtly modulated 'New Zealand' style to the authorial attitude behind that style. In more than one instance, I noted a tendency for the critic to identify with the sort of bourgeois New Zealander whom the author seems to treat with much disapproval and little sympathy. For example, we are told 'The Hole That Jack Dug' has for its centre 'the symbol of the working man and the absurd heroism of his misapplied strength as he digs his vast hole only to fill it in again'. But Jack is not, or certainly not merely, the symbol of the working man. Importantly, his poetry is contrasted to the phoney love of culture indulged in by his wife and her friends. The cryptic, yet soluble, story about the slowly, too, relates Jack to Sargeson. While a Sargeson story is not generally based on an absolute black-and-white dichotomy, and we are not apparently meant to feel, with the narrator, 'a bit sorry' for Jack's missis, it would seem that any misapplied energy is hers rather than Jack's, and that it is Jack rather than his missis who is meant to receive, at the least, most of our sympathy, and also a good deal of our respect.

His positive actions are, if one adopts a commonplace view, no doubt also in some respects negative, and one feels similarly about 'A Great Day', which Copland reads as though it is an indictment of Fred. This, however, becomes a matter of judging the author, not his characters. We may not wholly approve of Fred, but there is no indication that the author does not, and plenty that he does of Ker.

This leads me to a third important point of criticism about this long essay: it does not, as H. Winston Rhodes would rightly have us do, ask us to move beyond the realm of aesthetic criticism. Yet Sargeson's moral values are hardly those shared by New Zealand society at large, and at times disquieting even to those (one would think) who do not share the values of New Zealand society.

One may of course suggest that only one of my three reservations stands up from the neo-critical point of view. To which I would reply that if this is so, such neo-criticism is simply not an adequate answer to the academic or human problems posed by Sargeson's writings. If, however, one grants Copland his rather narrow focus, and even his somewhat limited criticism, one will not be too dissatisfied with the students who will inevitably substitute a perusal of his discussions for their own response to the text unless they are given more spirited and stimulating guidance. And it may be reassuring to know that the University of Auckland has conferred on Sargeson an honorary doctorate, as Copland informs us at the end of his biographical introduction.

FAVOURABLE REPORT


The editor of The New Quarterly Cave once wrote in a letter to me that he had long thought New Zealand Poetry 'beyond the pale', and so it was with a certain apprehension that I received the first examples from across this great divide to review for that journal. Against the Softness of Woman is one of these new arrivals, and let me at once say that whatever criticisms of achievement may be levelled against it, the intention behind this work is absolutely healthy and for the most part free from that staleness which characterizes so much "establishment" British poetry. What I mean is that, with certain exceptions, this poetry is about the right things.

The title poem, which opens the book, is one of the best examples of this—indeed, it is one of the best things in the book. The total poetic balance (i.e. that between the rhyming pattern and the metre, the laying down of the images) is congruently tight. I do, ask us to move beyond the realm of aesthetic criticism. Yet Sargeson's moral values are hardly encysted/holds no mystery, this is a nice last stanza:

when you are sunk tight on the pain,
let his singularity teach you;
soften your gall, it wanes thin
in the light of the poem's transparency holds no mystery; becomes like him
wear your other heart on your other sleeve,
keep this one boned down fine.

On the other hand, I am not so much impressed with the longest poem in the collection: "City Sequence". For me it is borrowed and derivative (from Snyder/Dorn) and like those graduates from the American beat generation often cynical in the way it tosses aside its own gems:

Oh you vain girl
to go collecting images
like pieces of rain—
verbal pancakes.

The effect of those last two words is so nearly Dadaist in their destructiveness that I can scarcely believe it was Ms Kemp's intention. Contrast this with the haunting and deceptively "Poem", short enough to reproduce in its entirety:

Poem
It was your face.
It was shy.
We walked.
It was your head. It was lit with sun.
I unbuckled your belt.
Hush, don't speak,
yellow flowers are bursting.

This is one of a number of good things mostly concentrated towards the end of the book. 'Leaves ..', 'Words are Whispers', 'A Pattern pf Loving', are my particular favourites. There are others which would have served the collection better had they been omitted: "The new People" for its resistable clever comment, perhaps "City Sequence" and 'The White Dove', for this is of the softness referred to earlier.

There is a way in which this book lacks any overall direction. As I have tried to point out, there are fine poems here, but others which are less successful. Ms Kemp needs to be much bolder about the things she clearly knows are right, and much less eclectic in her influences.

Despite these criticisms, my overall report is favourable. Jan Kemp's is an emerging and sympathetic talent which needs tightening and perhaps "City Sequence" and 'The White Dove', for this is of the softness referred to earlier.