

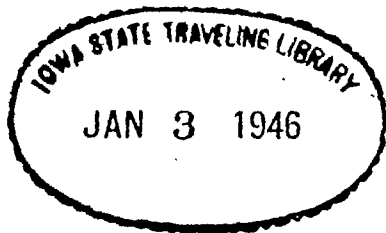
# NOTES AND QUERIES

for

READERS AND WRITERS, COLLECTORS AND LIBRARIANS

VOLUME CLXXXVIII.

JANUARY — JUNE, 1945



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# NOTES AND QUERIES

FOR READERS AND WRITERS, COLLECTORS AND LIBRARIANS

Vol. 188

No. 1

JANUARY 13, 1945

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THIS WEEK :

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NOTES AND QUERIES is published fortnightly by the Oxford University Press, Press Road, Neasden Lane, N.W.10. (Telephone: Gladstone 1186.) Subscription £2 2s. a year, U.S.A. \$10, including postage, two half-yearly indexes and two cloth binding cases, or £1 15s. 4d. a year, U.S.A. \$8.50 (without binding cases) should be sent to the manager, at the above address.

Communications for the editor should be addressed to Southfield House, Oxford.

Memorabilia.

"It does not disquiet me that there are passages in these four poems that I still do not understand, for whenever I read them, as I do often, the wonderful varied power of the language they employ holds me completely a victim, and I do not mind the uncertainties.

When we had read as far as that, in the *Time and Tide* review (9 December) of Mr. T. S. Eliot's new book, we knew that here was a mind we must respect. The pages under our eye did not reveal his name, and we were content to go on guessing. (It proved to be a name new to us—Henry Reed.) The next few lines were only less welcome because we ourselves prefer to read those who differ rather than those who agree with us.

Nor does it distress me that the particular religious inflection which their author intends the poems to have, comes from a religion which I no longer find myself trying to believe in.

And this is his reason: "I think that the alternating gentleness and forcefulness of the voice that is speaking would completely suspend my disbelief . . ."

After the exquisite language of these poems, whatever one tries to say by way of criticism or analysis sounds uncouth. One has also the feeling that one is slightly off the point, because they are poems which can be communicated only in their own words. But since they are difficult and elusive, it is necessary for a critic to say what he thinks they are about. Time is their theme. (That is not quite true, but it is as near as one will get).

He does, however, get nearer. But, knowing that we meant to soak ourselves in his review, we felt that we could afford to turn aside and see what *Meanjin Papers* (Winter, 1944) had to say about the same poems. By an accident, turning the pages backward, we discovered the Australian reviewer's name

at once, it is E. J. Stormon, S.J. After Mr. Reed one says at first: "This isn't writing, this is salesmanship."

"This is the most considerable thing Eliot has done, and is destined to be of importance in the history of contemporary verse. A much larger claim, however, might be made for it. Our literature is not particularly rich in philosophic poetry of a high order, but here at last is something that can live, as a work of art, in the company of Dante and Lucretius.

His next paragraph further chills us:

It is one of the advantages of Mr. Eliot's work that he has chosen a subject of peculiar significance for modern times. The meaning of the time process has been occupying European thought to an unprecedented degree in this century, as may be conveniently seen, for instance, from Mr. Wyndham Lewis's polemical *Time and Western Man*. Mr. Eliot has the distinction of suggesting at various points the thought of such diverse thinkers and general writers as Whitehead, Bergson, Christopher Dawson, Berdyaev, Spengler, and, behind them, of a mixed company which includes Kierkegaard and Hegel, St. Augustine and Heraclitus.

But in the end we have to say this: Father Stormon's is among the first of what will probably be a long line of commentaries on Mr. Eliot's 'Four Quartets' (after Hopkins one can safely prophesy this), and it may very well be among the best. Commentaries are stiff reading, whoever writes them, even if it is Robert Bridges on 'Endymion.' But we may trust Father Stormon even as we trust Bridges, for he concludes:

There is some point in calling attention to the main movement of its thought. But it is important primarily as a poem, and I am aware that I have hardly begun to speak about that.

Similarly Mr. Reed says:

I have ignored much that is in these poems. . . I have omitted the poetry. But in reading the poems one does not omit the poetry. One may attempt to pore over a passage with the aim of understanding it in detail, but the assured persuasive charm and eloquence of the words lure one on.

We must not repeat the very great claim he makes for 'Four Quartets' while we too "omit the poetry." Sometime we shall not omit it, and then we shall return to both Mr. Reed and Father Stormon.

TO fill our page we add a sentence from Mr. Eliot quoted elsewhere in *Meanjin Papers*:

to understand the [modern] poet we should have to understand ourselves—we should have, in fact, to reach a degree of self-consciousness of which mankind has never been capable, and of which, if attained, it might perish.