

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and  
Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1940.

The result is a book of genuine worth. Perhaps it rather falls to pieces towards the end, where the continuous narrative gives place to odds and ends taken from the diary; but for the most part, *Brother to the Ox* is a story which Richard Jefferies would certainly have loved and which George Borrow (if he had had the same advantages) might well have written. Here is farm-labouring as the farm-labourer himself sees it—or as the farm-labourer would see it if he were blessed with Mr. Kitchen's sensitive eye.

Indeed, it is his advantage over most country writers that, like Clare, he is a practitioner and not merely a sympathetic onlooker. The land has been his life; and when he writes of ploughing or threshing, his descriptions have an actuality that even a Hardy's must lack. Take, for instance, this:—

One thing I have always noticed when chipping stubbles, you turn over scores of field mice, nests of them, pink and naked. They are thrown on the ploughing, and you seldom see them at other times, only after harvest. As a lad I always felt like stopping to rescue the little beggars, but a flock of crows following behind soon cleared the furrow of any mouse not big enough to run away.

Instances of such eye-on-the-scene descriptions could be quoted from almost any page.

Another advantage which Mr. Kitchen possesses over the rest of us who write about the country is that he begins with no literary handicap. The result is a style as fresh and open and honest as the sky itself. When he says "Over all was the pleasant smell of dead horse-chestnut leaves and stable litter: I can smell it now as I write about it", you know at once that this is exactly true. "The rock was limestone," he says of one of his earlier farms, "and

in places showed through the soil, like the bare bones of a mammoth skeleton", and his own style, direct as Bunyan's himself, is much like this.

The output of country books grows yearly and it is noticeable that here, as in every other branch of writing, the romantic view has given place to the sensitively expressed fact. Mr. Kitchen's book is a model of such dignified exactitude and should win many friends. Perhaps the following extract will serve better than anything else to illustrate the unromanticized, factual-poetry which is his chief asset:

Artists have drawn some pleasing pictures of the shepherd leading his flock on the grassy uplands, or gazing pensively at a setting sun, but we have no picture of the shepherd in the muddy turnip field; of him and his lad sliding about in the muddy sheep-pen with skeps of sliced turnips; or the lad, bending down to clean out the troughs, receiving a gallant charge in the rear from a too-playful tup; or when snow and sleet swirls round their ears they 'chop and throw' in defiance of foul weather.

C. HENRY WARREN.

### PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG DOG, by Dylan Thomas.

Dent. 7s. 6d.

### THE BACKWARD SON, by Stephen Spender. Hogarth Press. 7s. 6d.

### FOLIOS OF NEW WRITING, edited by John Lehman. Hogarth Press. 5s.

*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Puppy* would, perhaps, have been the better title. For Mr. Dylan Thomas is, to a section of intelligentia which always likes to have somebody to spoil, the young puppy of contemporary poetry, an engaging, impudent, versatile, inexhaustible bundle of energy performing with limbs that are still more gristle than bone all the precocious tricks of word-making that are beyond

the capacity of the older dogs. To those poetasters who have forgotten the trick but not the thrill of pursuing their own tails the sight of Mr. Thomas doing so is, no doubt, very exciting. With such an audience watching, it is not surprising that Mr. Thomas gives a performance. Yapping, tumbling, tail-chasing, wicked and saucy, sometimes showing a glimpse of his teeth and taking a snap at the pants of respectability, Mr. Thomas has a lovely time. By reason of its title his book invites comparison with Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, but there is little except an odd burst of bright language, apparently nearer to Mrs. Dalloway than Stephen Dedalus, which can be considered in the same breath as that tender masterpiece. The novel which is an exploration of child consciousness is still, in spite of public weariness, a popular subject with writers. A preoccupation with small girls and lavatories, the desire to write the word bum on the garden gate, a readiness to be sick on frequent occasions—these were all parts of the novel of antic hay-making long before Mr. Thomas burst on the scene. Like the puppy which chases its own tail Mr. Thomas appears to suffer from the slightly cock-sure impression that he is doing it for the first time.

Mr. Spender is also a poet; his novel is also a reconstruction of a part of childhood. A review of both books could be devoted to a thesis of the contemporary state of things that forces a poet, in the struggle either for existence or simple recognition, to devote a large part of his time to working in a medium for which he is unfitted. For neither Mr. Thomas nor Mr. Spender are really novelists; it is a tragedy that they and their fellow-poets should be driven to sacrifice the palette, as it were,

for the distemper pot. Beautifully Mr. Spender writes—and through his picture of the sensitive boy struggling at school against conscience, home-sickness, cruelty and himself, he writes with a clear, mature delicacy—the first essay as a novelist can hardly have the effect, or importance, of his work as a poet. Every word of his novel is brush-stroke put in by an artist, and the resultant picture, however tenderly conceived, is not new. The rather sadistic headmaster, the matron, the boys with their passion for games, railway trains and sex; the suffering leaving home, the implication that the struggle between the sensitive and the hard-boiled the victory is always on the wrong side—all this has been painted many times before. Of all forms of criticism the most satisfactory is that which extends praise on one hand and withholds it in the other; yet I can see no other way of assessing Mr. Spender's book. For all the tenderness of its tender exploration of boyhood suffering and its beauty of touch, *Backward Son* lacks the fullest expression of the true poet somewhere hidden behind it.

The salute to *New Writing*, resurrected under a new title but under the same editorship and with the same sensible ideal of being "a laboratory where the writers of the future may experiment," must be brief but enthusiastic. Here in *New Writing*, Mr. Spender and his fellow-poets can occupy their proper place; short story writers like G. K. Green and H. T. Hopkinson, commentators like Henry Green, Rosamund Lehmann and George Barker, can spend their minds and hearts properly. As its editor, I hope that *New Writing* will remain for a long time "a vital impetus for the days to come". H. E. BATE