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NEW WRITING PHELAN AND CHARLTON

INTELLIGENT writers, with a bare half-dozen periodicals open to print their work in England, heard with despair that Mr. John Lehmann's *New Writing* was to be one of the earliest literary casualties of the war. Now their hopes may revive, for *New Writing* reappears as *Folios of New Writing* (Hogarth Press, 5s. net), under the same editorship and with the same common-sense aim—"to create a laboratory where the writers of the future may experiment, and where the literary movement may find itself." Thus, posing as an anthology, one magazine of importance has the sense to save itself. Unhampered by subscriptions, advertisements, and the month-to-month worries of the ordinary magazine's existence, *New Writing* can offer poets, commentators, short-story writers a refuge of permanence. Sponsored by publishers of intelligence, it needs no policy, and can be free in commentary and direction alike. If almost every publishing house of repute, in the last century, could afford to nurse its writers with a house magazine, it occurs to me that the publishers of to-day might read the writing chalked up by Mr. Lehmann on the walls of the Hogarth Press. For *Folios of New Writing* is to-day the only serious attempt to face up to, and remedy, the fact that the English literary periodical is dead of sleeping sickness. Now that magazines are, as one editor puts it, going down like flies, Mr. Lehmann's is perhaps the only solution for the appalling and sterile situation in which serious writers find themselves. The present number of *Folios of*

New Writing is well balanced. War, the country behind the lines, even the country behind the lines of the last war, are reflected in poems and stories, and short documentaries. Not all the contributors are English. André Chamson's *A Liaison Officer's Notebook*, well translated from the French by John Rodker, is most

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notable among contributions from abroad. Henry Green flogs the private school of 1914 (how many of us could confirm that "we had a sorry crew of masters") with strokes of fierce measured writing; the short stories by H. T. Hopkinson, G. F. Green, and Ralph Elwell-Sutton are all good. When to these contributions are added the poems of Stephen Spender, Nicholas Moore, David Gascoyne, H. B. Mallalieu, and the prose pieces of Miss Rosamond Lehmann and George Barker, it will be seen that Mr. Lehmann need have no fear for the material reputation of *New Writing*. To his own belief that it will be "a vital impulse for the days to come" I will only add my own hope that it will be a still more vital example.

I did not read Mr. Jim Phelan's *Lifer*, but the picture contained in Mr. Macartney's *Walls Have Mouths* was enough. Dartmoor was burned so vividly on the mind that to enter it again with Mr. Phelan in *Jail Journey* (Secker & Warburg, 12s. 6d. net) is almost like going back home. Phelan and Macartney were in Dartmoor together; Macartney's was a political-secrets crime about which, I believe, there was much controversy; but Phelan shot a man. With this stark information presented on page one, Phelan makes it clear that his book is not of the apologist class. "Almost it has become a *sine qua non* that a writer on jails should have been innocently punished," he

says. He, however, will not have it like this; he was a guilty man and as such "eligible for extinction one morning." Nor does he blame the System, since "jails differ as do tea-shops." He wants to show, and succeeds in showing, how the English penal system works, first in a specialist first-offender prison like Maidstone, secondarily in Dartmoor, where "guns and clubs were openly carried, and no one pretended they were quaint, old-world ornaments"; and finally in Parkhurst.

If in the first instance Phelan committed a crime against society, then it might not be fantastic to suggest that *Jail Journey* amply repays his debt. I have never discovered if prison reformers, or prison officials, read intelligent books of reminiscences by ex-convicts; nor, I suppose, are they urged to do so by the society against whom crime is committed. But every word of Phelan's book is illustrative, suggestive, nervous with experiences which should make reformers, officials, and ordinary folk sit down and think. Nowhere, I believe, does Phelan suggest that the criminal against society should not be punished, but almost every page of his book contains evidence, bitterly bought, that most of that punishment is petty, ignorant, destructive, and repressive. Psychologically at least, to judge from *Jail Journey*, the English prison system is as antiquated as the walls of Dartmoor themselves.

Perhaps it goes without saying, since Phelan is Irish, that the book is well written. Thirteen years in prison might excusably turn any man's ink into acid; release might conceivably make him a petulant maniac. Phelan neither writes viciously nor with the slightest taint of self-pity. Society having punished him, he offers back, in lucid, vigorous, well-documented style, the old suggestion that there are crimes and

crimes. And society, which means you and I, would be foolish not to listen to him.

Mr. L. E. O. Charlton is well known as a commentator on aeronautics and as a sturdy opponent of blood-sports, and he may well become notorious as the inventor of a curious style of writing which might be called the third-person autobiographical. This style, which he uses throughout *More Charlton* (Longmans, 12s. 6d. net), consists of substituting "he" for "I" as the narrator, and of otherwise referring to himself with irritating frequency as Charlton. The effect on the reader is profoundly discouraging. By appropriating the third person for himself, Mr. Charlton is automatically bound to stick labels of identity over everyone else. Thus the book is peopled by "the director," "the friend," "his informant," etc.; "Charlton was puzzled," "Charlton was in his office," "Charlton remarked that," "Charlton was by no means impressed," etc. In this way an extraordinarily pompous effect is produced, leaving a style comparable only to that of Royal Courts, where "we are not amused," and a narrative that frequently lacks all simplicity of direction. The account of the author's visit to Mexico, his deals with a London publisher, his lecture at the Book Fair, are given an air of heavy naïveté by this odd transposition of the persons. Mr. Charlton's reason is, I think, that what he has to say is often too personal for any other method, but I must confess that I sympathize with his first publishers, who regarded it with disfavour. These remarks are made with regret, for *More Charlton* reveals a vigorous personality, well-informed, a pungent defender of fox and hare, and an aeronautical authority of courage and intelligence.

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