

# "The Land of Singing Waters"

By A. M. Stephen.

(A review by Lionel Stevenson.)

In a recent effort to define the word "modern" as a term of critical approbation, I suggested that one of the qualities distinguishing authors of genuine importance from those of merely ephemeral success is their constant experimentation and development, obvious when their works are read in chronological order. This particular test can be very strikingly applied to Mr. A. M. Stephen, whose second book of poems, "The Land of Singing Waters," is artistically published by J. M. Dent & Sons. As compared with his previous volume, "The Rosary of Pan," these poems show an advance in technique and effectiveness which is almost incredible in four years, and which is extremely interesting to any student of the poetic craft.

The defects of the former book were irregularities of metre, marring the music of the lines, and a somewhat chaotic vagueness of phrasing, rendering ineffectual the spacious imagination and exalted emotion of the writer. Both of these shortcomings have been triumphantly overcome in "The Land of Singing Waters." The mastery of a wide variety of metrical effects is thorough and unfailing; and the cosmic flights of imagination have been captured and crystallized in specific and concise imagery. Some of the methods of self-discipline which the poet underwent can be recognized by the evidence of the poems in this book, and they are laudable methods, sanctioned by many notable antecedents. One is the practise of severely restricted forms, such as the sonnet, ballade, and rondel; and Mr. Stephen's specimens combine accuracy with an ease and grace which is rare under such limitations; his ballades and rondeaus compare favorably with those of the English and American poets of the nineties who made such delicacies their chief product. The group of rondels on Persian topics are lovely little poems, quite apart from technicalities, and the ballades obtain all the effects of emphasis and harmony which are the virtues of the form. Another of Mr. Stephen's undertakings has been the testing of stanzaic forms not hitherto employed in English poetry; the possibilities of variation in line-length and rhyme-arrangement are practically limitless, as compared to the few simple types that poets revert to again and again, and some of Mr. Stephen's experiments result in new and pleasing harmonies, although a few prove too complicated, losing the rhythm in jerky involutions.

But it is a proof of the poet's genuine inspiration that he does not need the assistance of restricted or unusual forms to make his poems interesting; his very finest are written in the simple and familiar metres in which he has to challenge the achievements of his famous predecessors, and he splendidly survives that rigorous ordeal.

More fundamental, however, than these studies in technique has been his devotion to the great English poets, by which he has gained the authentic voice



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and manner of the high tradition. His thoughts shape themselves naturally in lines that are essentially poetic in music and vocabulary. Only a thorough saturation in poetry can implant this quality in the subconsciousness, endowing every phrase with a richness of connotation far beyond the mere literal content. It includes cultivation of an ear for verbal music, and Mr. Stephen's use of orotund vowels and alliterative phrases merits high praise. It includes also a special assortment of words not used in every-day prose, and in this respect Mr. Stephen is inclined to riot a little too prodigally in the treasures that he has gained: when one finds "incarnadined" and "plenilune" on a single page one feels that a virtue is in danger of thriving into an excess. Like most poets, Mr. Stephen has a little hoard of especially cherished words, which begin to obtrude themselves when a large number of the poems are read at a sitting; these in-

clude "dream," "white," "rune" (also a favorite of Wilson MacDonald's), and the suspiciously padded "adown." Finally, twice or thrice he reveals his saturation in English poetry by a line which echoes too exactly the phrasing of previous poets, particularly Tennyson, as in "He comes, my love, my king," "Horse and rider reel," "In stoles of white."

But these are very trivial and infrequent blemishes, and captious criticism has no further voice. To offset them, one is almost baffled in attempting to select examples from the wealth of notable merits. In the group of narrative poems on British Columbia themes, which gives the book its felicitous title, Mr. Stephen fulfills another of my conditions of "modernity" by realizing the value of the untouched material close to his hand; and he avoids monotony in these longer poems by symphonic changes in metrical form in accord with mood and theme, after the manner initiated by Alfred Noyes. These are not mere ballads or versified tales, they are epic fragments, of a dignity appropriate to the setting they depict.

The other poems in the collection, however, which have no novelty of topic to distinguish them, must be the final criterion of their author's achievement, for here he handles the universal poetic themes, which are only justified when something fresh and unprecedented in vision or imagery is contributed to them, when the poet's individuality of emotion and experience is strong enough to impress itself in competition with all predecessors. And there is no question of Mr. Stephen's success in giving this touch of personality to what he writes. Like all true poets, he has a central core of definite and consistent philosophy, and inevitably his is akin to many other contemporary discussions. In concentrating his attention upon the quest for ideal beauty, he is allied with Masfield, Brooke, Yeats, Noyes, all the poets who are attempting a mystical interpretation of our new universe; but his own theory of sublimated physical love as the key to the mystery is distinctive and well-presented. Furthermore, his wide range of allusions, his use of the whole cultural heritage of the race as a source of imagery and symbolism, unites him with the best poets of our time.

Beyond a doubt, Mr. Stephen is endowed with the singing sense. The lyric quality can be felt throughout his