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THE NOVELIST'S PAIR OF TONGS:

=====

an investigation into the literary significance  
of John A. Lee's novels.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of M. A.  
in English Literature at Massey University.

J. S. Nicholson

1970

It is the artist alone in whose hands Truth  
becomes impressive and a living principle of action..

(J.S.Mill, letter to Carlyle.)



*As a child in Dunedin about the turn of the century.*



*—Alexander Tieson, M.L.A.  
On entering politics in the early 1920s.*



*As leader of the Democratic  
Labour Party addressing electors*



*As he is today, aged 76.*



—Alexander Turnbull Library

**DAYS OF GLORY:** John A. Lee chaired by the members of his committee and his supporters after winning the Grey Lynn seat for Labour with a huge majority in 1935.

## ERRATA

- Page iv. item 1931  
add "adopted three children, aged two, three and seven."
- Page v. item 1943-53  
delete "adopted three children, aged two, three and seven."
- Page v. et passim.  
for The N.Z. Encyclopaedia read An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand.
- Page 10, line 12.  
for "he wrote" read "this latter wrote".
- Page 24, line 4.  
for "A N.Z. War History" read "An account of the incident"
- Page 24, line 14.  
for "Stewart" read "Stewart, Col.H."
- Page 30, line 11.  
for "Hannan" read "Hon. J.R. Hanan, Minister of Justice."
- Page 104, item 1(iv).  
for "Truth lib." read "the library of News Media (N.Z.) Ltd., Wellington, publishers of New Zealand Truth."; ditto page 106, item 3(iv).
- Page 106, item 3(iv).  
for "Study Lee", read "article".
- Page 106, item 3(iii).  
for "Country Lib.," read "Country Library Service."

Errata (Cont'd.)

Page 107. The references to articles, &c., under Gordon, Hall, Pearson, Rhodes and Stevens should read as follows:

Gordon, Ian A. Article on the novel, in Oxford New Zealand Encyclopaedia p.269. London, 1965.

Hall, D.O.W. Article on literature, in An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand vol.2, p.32.

Pearson, Bill. "Fretful Sleepers, A Sketch of New Zealand Behaviour, and its Implications for the Artist", Landfall 6(3): pp.201-30, September, 1952. Reprinted in Landfall Country (ed. Charles Brasch) Caxton, 1962. See also thesis p.20, line 21 and p.94 n.58.

Rhodes, H. Winston. "Writers and Writing in New Zealand, VI. The Novels of John A. Lee", New Zealand Libraries 10(11): pp.230-35. December, 1947.

Stevens, Joan. Article on fiction, in An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand. vol.2, p.330.

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## PREFACE

With regard to Chapter 1: to find out how Children of the Poor, The Hunted and Civilian Into Soldier were originally received I have perused over 100 contemporary comments in newspapers, magazines and letters of overseas and New Zealand origin. I was aided in this search by Mr. Lee who made his files available to me at "Vital Books Ltd.," Auckland. The files were in no apparent order apart from a characteristic antithetical juxtapositioning of some comments; nor were the files complete; some documents were sealed. There were enough items of interest, nevertheless, to produce a firm outline of the history of the reception of the novels. Additional reviews were obtained from various libraries.

To find out how subsequent critics have judged the novels I have studied approximately 25 comments by New Zealand scholars and writers in various publications from the forties to the sixties, and in letters. Post-contemporary comment has been arranged as far as it was possible in chronological order. There has been no intentional slanting in the selection and arrangement of comments.

To describe the literary source of Lee's acknowledged power I subjected his first three published novels to a close reading. My observations on structure are confined mainly to Ch. IV. Style is detailed in Ch. V. It is not unusual for original feeling to disappear after analysis. Eliot noticed this happening, in Frontiers of Criticism, in which essay he refers to "the lemon squeezer school". Lee, however, presents the literary object in such a way that feeling tends to follow thought so that on thinking feeling returns. The alternation is endless and urgent.

Current readership statements have been detailed in the appendix.

In most instances book titles throughout the thesis have been abbreviated to initial letters thus: COP (Children of the Poor), TH (The Hunted), CIS (Civilian Into Soldier), LWPS (The Lee Way to Public Speaking).

The photos of the frontispiece are from the N. Z. Listener 17 Nov. 1967.

My thanks to Professor R. G. Freen who asked me to consider a thesis on John A. Lee, and who with Dr Broughton concluded that "such a study would have intrinsic merit." I am also pleased to acknowledge their advice and direction together with that of Mr O'Gorman. I thank also Miss Rodger who helped to find obscure references. Much appreciated, too, has been the goodwill and co-operation of all correspondents.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

I have assembled this outline of Mr Lee's life from the following published sources, and from correspondence with him. I have tried to make it accurate and complete, but it is in some respects tentative, partly because some of the accounts I have followed are misleading. For example, in the Official History of N. Z.'s Effort in the Great War, vol. II, Lee is listed as "Sergt." in the index but referred to as "Pte." in the text.

## Delinquent Days

Dominion, editorial, 1st Oct. 1938.

The Lee Way To Public Speaking

I Fight For N. Z.

International Press Who's Who in N. Z. 1933

International Who's Who 1939

N. Z. Weekly News, July 28, 1969

Official History of N. Z.'s Effort in the Great War, Vol. II

The Encyclopaedia of N. Z.

The N. Z. Business Who's Who, 1967-8

Who's Who in N. Z., sixth and ninth editions

Wilmot, "John A. Lee, M. P. and Man of Letters,"

N. Z. Mag. 22, no. 4, 1943.

This outline is, as far as I know, the first extended chronological account.

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1891 Born, 31st October, Castle Street, Dunedin, son of Alfredo Lee and Mary, nee Taylor. (Can trace his gipsy descent on his father's side back to Wiltshire 1820. Lee is fifty percent gipsy; on his mother's side the Fleming family of the discoverer of penicillin appears at his grandparents' level. His grandfather served in 72 Highlanders and in India. A cousin, Alexander Taylor, decd., one of Alexandra's fruit pioneers was on the Anglican Synod, Otago, for 25 years.)

Attended Albany Street Primary School, Dunedin.

1906-8 Convicted of stealing. On being caught for another offence he was sent to the Burnham Industrial School officially until the age of 21. He escaped after two years from a job and worked on farms and in factories in Otago, as ploughman, waggoner, harvester, fencer, ditcher, flax and threshing mill-hand.

- 1909-10 Moved to the North Island and worked at various jobs including fencing, draining, post splitting, farming. Fled from the police down the Wanganui River.
- 1911-12 Mt. Eden: served 9 months 23 days. Released at age 21. For the rest of the year he was fencing in the bush and attached to the Public Works Department in North Auckland.
- 1913 Drove the last horse drawn bus between Birkenhead and Highbury. Listened to soapbox orators at Quay Street, Auckland. "I was ready to explode with radical ideas." (LWPS, 10)
- 1914-15 Joined a railway building gang in North Auckland at Otamatea early in 1914 where he worked with a pick and shovel. "In six months I passed from capturing pity to commanding the ears of hard bitten men." (LWPS, 49) Also served as a porter and barman, Waverley Hotel, Auckland in this period.
- 1916-19 Served with N. Z. E. F. 1st Wellington regiment, Hawkes Bay Company. Awarded D. C. M. for conspicuous gallantry at Messines. Lost left forearm at Maily Maillot.
- He writes, "During convalescence on the Oatlands Drive in Surrey in World War 1, I formed my own debating club," (LWPS 63) and states there were men of all opinions in the army hospital. Lee's first published writing which he claims is "not worth looking at," also belongs to this period. He wrote for the Chronicles of N. Z. E. F. He also wrote the original draft of Civilian Into Soldier when in hospital in Army Blue.
- 1919 Married Marie Ethel Guy, a descendant of the Grace cricketing family, Westport; elected President, Auckland Labour Party. "From 1919 until 1922 I was the speaker in Quay Street who drew the largest audiences" (N. Z. Weekly News July, 28. 1969.) Occasional Sunday night speeches in the Auckland Opera House after World War 1. "I was in demand as a speaker while I was yet a learner". (LWPS 78)
- 1921 Failed to win parliamentary seat Auckland East.
- 1922 Elected MP Auckland East; youngest member in parl. Lee was the prop. of a soap manuf. business when first elected to parliament.
- 1925 Wrote leaflet on Wage Cuts.
- 1928 Defeated by J. B. Donald  
Wrote Auckland Election Journal, (wrote it all each year except for one article).

- 1929 Managed the Palace Hotel in Rotorua: "One year was enough." Wrote another Civilian Into Soldier. The original draft was not used.
- 1930 Wrote the sequel Reintegration (unpublished). Writing full time and organising, unpaid, for the Labour Party.
- 1931 Elected MP for Grey Lynn; as before wrote Auckland Election Journal;
- 1932-3 Wrote Children of the Poor.
- 1933 Recorded in International Press Who's Who in N. Z. Activities mentioned: Past member executive R.S.A. Vice Pres. Auck. Rugby League, Port Chevalier Yacht Squadron. Recreations: Writing, reading, gardening, walking, football and dancing.
- 1933-4 Wrote The Hunted.
- 1934 Wrote Labour Has A Plan (Commissioned by Lab. Confr. 1933); The History of the Smash and Grab Government (200th sold); Children Of The Poor published.
- 1935 Polled the highest majority at the election. Wrote the Auckland Election Journal, "Message of a Statesman" (in the Journal). Return Soldier Vote Labour (a circular).
- 1936 Became N. Z.'s first Parliamentary Undersecretary, to Savage and Nash. The Hunted published.
- 1936-7 Wrote The Politician and the Fairy (unpublished; being revised; "trouble is that everyone concludes a book like this is completely autobiographical").
- 1937 Civilian Into Soldier published. Wrote Socialism in N. Z.
- 1938 Polled the highest majority recorded in N. Z. up to that time. Wrote the Labour Party policy almost single handed. Socialism in New Zealand published. "The world might gather from this publication that New Zealanders are descended from the 'scum of the earth'." (Dominion) As well as proclaiming policy Socialism in N. Z. was, Lee claims, "the first British text to advocate authors' lending rights." Wrote, If Prices Fall the People Perish (leaflet); N. Z. Labour Party Notes For Speakers: Hitler (pamphlet).

- 1939 Recorded in International Who's Who. Lee by this time had launched Labour's Housing Plan; played a large part in socialisation of Bank of N. Z., and in establishment of Motherhood Endowment. He had published four books, written one other, as well as numerous articles. Wrote The Lee Letter: Psychopathology in Politics (late in the year); Debt Finance For War; Peace Versus Democracy.
- Appointment revoked in December 1939
- 1940 Expelled from the Labour Party (May). "Between the date of expulsion and the next conference 200 branches of the Labour Party died". Debt Free Currency published in 1939 was published again this year (sold 80,000) Wrote I Fight For New Zealand (sold 100,000; 6d copy). Founded and led The Democratic Labour Party for three years.
- 1943 Published The Yanks Are Coming
- 1943-53 Established and edited Lee's Weekly; adopted three children aged two, three, and seven. Wrote Manufacture or Perish (sold 10,000). Published Shining With The Shiner (1944). (The N. Z. Encyclopaedia contains a column about Slattery, Edmund 1840-1927. The only references included are the obituary in the Otago Daily Times and Lee's short stories.)
- 1948 Established a bookselling business known as "Vital Books" Ltd.
- 1959-61 Member of the Council of N. Z. Book Assn.
- 1963 Published Simple On A Soapbox
- 1964 Attended Albany Street Primary School reunion. Wrote The Importance of Being Sir Earnest (unpublished, "novel on electoral power of booze in politics").
- 1965 Published The Lee Way To Public Speaking; Rhetoric At The Red Dawn; Shiner Slattery.
- 1965-6 Wrote My Childhood ("hurried, to leave a record") (unpublished).
- 1967 12th edition N. Z. Business Who's Who lists Associated Co's: Printing Service Ltd., Democratic Property Ltd., three directors, staff of Six. Published Delinquent Days.

- 1968 Wrote Roughnecks, Rolling Stones, Rouseabouts, (some of these short stories have been published in Focus). Revised Mussolini's Millions ("a trifle"; originally published as a serial in Lee's Weekly.)
- 1969 Honorary Doctorate of Laws conferred by Otago University. Sculptured head commissioned by N. Z. Arts Council.
- 1970 Represented P. E. N. at Wellington.

## RECEPTION AND REPUTATION

My intention in this chapter is to outline the history of the comment on Lee's three novels published in the thirties. The first part of the outline concerns contemporary comment.

(i) Children of the Poor

1.  
The succès de scandale which McCormick claims came to COP on publication is difficult to measure and would appear to be largely verbal and confined to New Zealand. This of course does not invalidate the intensity of the phenomenon and there is written evidence to show that an unusual event had occurred. Surviving commentaries either damn the book with faint praise, accept it with reservation or reject it totally. The amount of praise would appear to balance the amount of censure, not an unusual condition for a first publication except that COP was published anonymously in 1934 in both England and America, and subsequently sold 9000 copies up to the time that the plates were melted owing to wartime regulations. It used to be said that only one first novel in 300 sold over 3000.  
2.

3.  
Over 800 English copies came to New Zealand. I do not know about the American edition.  
4.  
Review dates indicate COP could have been and probably was being read and sold during the winter of 1934. Undoubtedly public interest was high during the election year of 1935 when the second edition was published with the author's name and when the book was 'hawked' by the conservative party. (The hawking will be

detailed in another section, see p. 36 ) Truth's review, Nov 7, 1934: ("New Zealand will sit up and take notice of this book") although stressing the book's sociological value, was headlined: "Sister's degradation for starving family. Sensational book on vice, poverty and misery". Truth also thought COP might prove disconcerting to Dunedin, as did Tomorrow, which thought smug Dunedin would call the book exaggerated.

Rhodes states in N.Z. Novels that COP was neither the first nor the last novel to attack middle class values but: "it caused its author to be attacked with more violence and venom than any New Zealand novelist before or since".  
5.

Mr L.G. Anderson, present superintendent of the Child Welfare Division, also remarks on the creation of "quite a sensation at the time, as I well remember." He goes on to say: "I was a university student at Canterbury at the time the book came out. I have a general recollection that the book was 'the talk of the town'. Everyone I knew read it and so did I. Perhaps the unusual (almost unique at that time) frankness in the early part of the book aroused a lot of interest. You will remember that John Lee describes his mother as a prostitute. That kind of thing was up until then, unheard of... Today it is common place for writers to engage in frank, even salacious disclosures. It wasn't then." Mr Anderson is not sure whether he is "right in crediting some of the initial interest to that disclosure... the book of course aroused indignation and shock as well as interest. Some people could not understand how a man could be so heartless as to describe his mother as a prostitute."  
6.



Replying to a request for amplification concerning the term: 'Succès de scandale', Dr. McCormick wrote: "the only authentic information on the local response to COP would be found in the reviews which the book received in New Zealand newspapers at the time... I was living in Dunedin at the time of the book's publication - or soon after - and the comment one heard in not very enlightened circles was that Mr Lee had acted disgracefully in revealing the sordid facts about his mother and his sister and his own upbringing. (The assumption was that the novel was autobiographical).... It was a purely local affair... chiefly concerned with the propriety of revealing discreditable facts about one's relatives. For it to be understood the controversy must be placed in its historic context."<sup>7</sup>

In support of his own assertion Prof. Rhodes wrote: "My remarks were not based on an examination of reviews, but on the comments I heard and were reported to me two or three years following its publication. In my experience only two New Zealand novels have become topics of conversation in ordinary gatherings of people. The first (leaving out Jean Devanny) was COP, the second Bill Pearson's Coal Flat. People took sides and argued with passion. In Lee's case it took longer because of the later political campaign and because he flaunted his 'gutter' upbringing in order to anger his respectable colleagues. The line of attack was generally that he had no right to drag his family through the dirt and from the point of view of the 'respectable' middle classes that he had no right to tarnish New Zealand and particularly Dunedin's name. He could not be forgiven for dragging family or national skeleton out of the cupboard.... How far

all this found its way into print I don't remember and it would take considerable investigation not only of reviews but of forgotten publications and letters to the paper to find out... There may have been and probably was more virulence in Dunedin, but I was thinking of New Zealand as a whole whenever Lee's name or the subject of the book were under discussion.<sup>8.</sup>

Part of the total pattern surrounding the New Zealand appearance of each of Lee's novels emerges from the preceding statements: publicity, instant reaction, the question of autobiography or the proportion of fact to fiction, propriety, originality of subject matter, authorial motivation, the association of literature and politics, controversy. The Hunted and Civilian Into Soldier, however, did not cause the same degree of sensation in enlightened or unenlightened circles.

As can be seen there is an element of doubt concerning how widespread the verbal response was. Available published statements also indicate more than a tremor of adverse moral criticism, that the sensation was confined to New Zealand but not solely to Dunedin, that it continued for at least four years. Dunedin generally, Lee claims, took thirty years to accept the book.<sup>9.</sup> Lee also claims: "COP in some circles in New Zealand almost got the reception that was given to Dreiser's Sister Carrie except that it was not suppressed.<sup>10.</sup>

<sup>11.</sup> An unspecified reader's report of 1933 gave the length of COP at about 92,000 words and the opinion of fair. "I do not recommend publication as it stands." The reader thought it would be better in the third person and improved by taking out such padding as lengthy accounts

of general history and topography of New Zealand. While he found fault with the episodic structure he considered the book contained some excellent matter. He found the study of the school master dull and the most interesting episode the visit of Rose to the Chinese den; the stay with the grandmother was also dull. This astute reader does voice some typical and later aesthetic criticism, namely the objection to episodic structure and to 'interpolations'.

Whether as a result of the report is not clear but James B. Pinker & Son, literary agents, rejected GOP in June 1933. "Frankly, accustomed as we are, unfortunately in this country to such worse poverty (three and four in a room) the children in this book do not seem terribly poor... hardly sufficient to arouse sympathy for their criminal tendencies."<sup>12.</sup>

It is evident that English acceptance followed American as Vanguard expressed annoyance at the Pinker attitude in a letter to Upton Sinclair who had sent Lee's novel to them. In 1933 President of Vanguard in a letter to Lee enclosing copies of the contract wrote: "I can't recall when any manuscript or book stirred me more profoundly." Again in 1942 on retirement he wrote: "All of us are convinced GOP is a great book," and again in 1948: "As you know GOP is one of my favourite books."<sup>13.</sup>

This indicates the original wholehearted acceptance of the affective power and may point to characteristic ethnographical differences: English reserve and American warmth. Shaw, however, remarked on the "peculiar poignancy" of GOP in the following year.<sup>14.</sup> The implied American definition of greatness and the use of the term book is of interest when considering New Zealand post-contemporary criticism and

the desire of critics to seek assurance in the more objective criterion of genre.

On the 21st December 1935 the chairman of the Hawera Public Library Committee replying to a letter about the withdrawal from circulation of COP wrote: "The decision of the committee, after reading it, is that, whereas the book may correctly portray the squalid existence of a section of New Zealand city poor, it introduces such gross immorality and dwells upon debasing sexual matters in such a manner that it is considered an unsuitable book for a public body to make available for general reading. For this reason it has been with-  
15.  
drawn."

During the first New Zealand Book Week of 1936 a Timaru paper reported that some objection had been made to COP and the book was un-  
16.  
officially removed from the library shelves. And while the book was praised by Alan Mulgan in the introduction of N.Z. Book Week, as probably the most realistic of all New Zealand novels, an impressive study of hard poverty in a young country, as notable for its psychological insight as for its picture of social conditions, and, containing passages of remarkable beauty, the title and author of COP  
17.  
is not listed in that publication.

Contradictory attitudes multiply.

In November 1938 the town clerk of the Rangiora Borough Council  
18.  
noted COP was second in public favour.

The final example of written condemnatory rejection comes in 1937 from Geo F. Inglis in Forum. He refers to the book as offensively filthy, distorted, valueless and poisonous, telling nothing of life

only of death and putrefaction.<sup>19</sup> (Lee comments that Inglis was once their landlord, that a pile of manure was discovered at the back of his house years later. Inglis didn't understand the book or was resentful.)

Inglis' attack was overtly a response to a eulogy by the Rev. O.E. Burton in the Methodist Bible Class Link (1937) who found "a rare beauty about much of the book", and the characters to be of absorbing practical interest. "In this book we have a boy looking at the church and deciding against it. His impressions are worth examining..." It should be read he thinks "By every minister, social worker, and Sunday school teacher..." He calls it a great human document and "no christian should read without serious examination of himself."<sup>20</sup> This is the first acknowledgment of the book's moral value.

The review of The Glasgow Forward which was reproduced in the N.Z. Worker, widens the appeal to include the education of the young, social workers in slum areas, school teachers and stipendary magistrates, thus stressing the book's sociological value.

Tomorrow also recognises this value but raises the complex question of the book's motivation, thinking that unless the purpose is to open the eyes of society to the results of poverty it is a cruel and selfish book, (queried on this point Lee made no comment) "cruel in exposing the lives of mother and sister and selfish if merely satisfying an ego."<sup>21</sup> One incident is remarked as hitting below the belt - that concerning the gaol chaplain. "Hitting a man when he is down is never fair play, neither points the moral or adorns the tale." Thus even in an early New Zealand radical paper controversy surrounded COP.

The New Zealand newspaper reviews with the exception of Truth (a warm reception) and the Otago Daily Times (which dinned with faint praise) were temperate. Such statements as follow, together with short plot accounts were typical: "indictment of those whose duty it is to help the poor;" "among the manuscripts of poverty and poetry;" "the rights of children are vital adjuncts to the rights of man;" "drama contained within the limits of actuality." The Otago Daily Times thought it "impossible to gauge the truth of the tale", called the first few pages "ranting, unedifying," considered "the sensation mongering modified as the story proceeded," that there was "sensitive writing in parts," but that there would be more merit "if the tale had been told without political bias."<sup>22.</sup>

Among those who valued the authenticity was Miss Baughan, a Christchurch prison reformer and social worker: "I know the chinese girl, the victims of Axeldeen ... you know much that the orthodox citizen can't believe."<sup>23.</sup> The Times Literary Supplement also stressed the 'ring of truth', and the moving quality. Robin Hyde called COP a tragedy.<sup>24.</sup>

Jane Mander was the first New Zealand commentator to my knowledge to judge the novel on its literary qualities. While hailing COP as a "landmark in New Zealand literature" she says it has technical faults. She notices overstressing and sarcasm and although she admires the portraits of the mother and the "power, the vitality, the magnificent material of the works of the greatest tragedy," in places it is "crudely written."<sup>25.</sup>

All the American reviews note the moving quality and the vigour of the writing; two of the five read note a universal significance. The New York Times, for example, states: "it (COP) is not confined to its time in a pre-war world nor its place in a certain section of New Zealand." Two reviews qualify praise with technical comments such as, "despite unevenness", and, "despite clumsiness of construction." The Saturday Review notes the "wonderful insight into the psychology of children".<sup>26.</sup> The New York Herald Tribune raises the question of responsibility: is character or environment responsible for delinquency? - an interesting point in the light of subsequent propaganda charges. This review also states that both revolt and showmanship enter into the tale - further evidence of complexity of theme and motivation.

<sup>27.</sup> While Tomorrow in New Zealand noted a lack of bitterness the American Saturday Review of Literature noted: "He is bitter and well he might be; his bitterness frequently carries him to sentimental extremes of exposition and commentary, but the solidarity of his accomplishment remains."<sup>28.</sup> Again contradiction and qualification. The SRL reviewer also wondered with other-world detachment what Rose would have said to Bessie Cotter's remark: "It ain't low wages that drives a girl into prostitution." The question of sentimentality is also raised for the first time by the SRL reviewer.

In general American criticism was favourable and balanced. Uncertainty about total value, seen in the acknowledgment of the affective power on the one hand and technical deficiencies on the other, indicates some distrust of the feelings, which distrust, with exceptions, tends to develop into bewilderment, neglect or indifference in subsequent

New Zealand comment which if not solving the original issues has at least clarified them. At the same time the appreciation<sup>of</sup> COP has increased, more copies being sold in 1967 than in 1935.<sup>30.</sup>

Those who, to my knowledge, accepted the book from the first unreservedly were, the President of Vanguard Press (and I presume Upton Sinclair; Simple on a Soap Box is dedicated to him "who found me my first publisher"), George Bernard Shaw (although Shaw was critical of Lee's acceptance of conventional shame, he thought one of the merits of the book was that despite the acceptance the thief and whore appeared as heroes)<sup>31.</sup>, Alan Mulgan, and Downie Stewart the nationalist intellectual in the Massey and Coates government of Lee's time. In a note to Lee in parliament he wrote: "when you meet that author of COP tell him I have read his book. So has my sister whose soft heart was melted again and again to an extent I have never seen before. I will tell you what I think when I meet you. It ought to have a good chance of becoming a classic."<sup>32.</sup>

Clearly the book did cause a stir and clearly the book was evaluated although no extended criticism was produced. New Zealand prose fiction of novel length has remained relatively untouched by the analyst. For the times it seems to have had exceptionally good coverage including one review I have not seen but one which pleased the author, an illustrated page and a half in the Dutch paper Het Volk.<sup>33.</sup> In Lee's view: "books like airplanes rise against resistance."<sup>34.</sup>

Before outlining post-contemporary opinion certain items of literary significance concerning TH and GIS will be dealt with.



(ii) The Hunted

TH was published in 1936 in book form and as a serial in Truth. Numerous reviews in English provincial papers recommended TH. Australian and New Zealand reviews were generally favourable, only The Otago Daily Times giving reluctant credit. Selections will illustrate the diversity of critical opinion.

One reviewer (R. Dunlop) thought the style became monotonous but in spite of it Porcello's bid for freedom aroused his grim hopes for success and he felt his panting exhaustion and his hatred of his environment. Another, in The Manchester Guardian, stated Lee had no grace of style though he could write. His story suffered from a lack of method. Pages of moralising interfered. The story should have been told through the consciousness of Porcello. Nevertheless it was an interesting book and the character powerfully presented. <sup>36.</sup> Book Review 2YA referred to TH as "superior in narrative and gusto," and although the author showed a lack of tact in choice of words, using "ingest" for "eat," for example, it was an uncomfortably powerful book and the reviewer felt encouraged to invite the application of world standards. TH was more than New Zealand. It was humanity. The same reviewer thought the picture overdrawn and propagandistic. <sup>37.</sup> Another, in The Evening Post declared Porcello a genuine creation. There is more than one review reference to frankness, poignancy, tragedy, truth and nobility, which qualities are admired. There are references to the book's moral and educational values.

The Otago Daily Times had the "tantalising sense that the author was on the verge of literary fulfilment" and thought the chase in part four

(as did other reviewers) to be tense and compulsive but that TH "for the most part" was "pedestrian narrative". It might be argued, the reviewer stated, that the book was sociology first and fiction second, a human document which elicited the reader's sympathy rather than his critical appreciation of style, but there were many books on sociology which required to be of outstanding performance to be highly praised. TH commanded no accolade. The reviewer next noted the book's special interest was that it was written by a man in a responsible position. However, it was not topical and hence the description was of historical importance only. Despite the demerits, which also included mention of needless underlining of class elements, vigour rather than strength of writing, disproportion in presentation of character, "Porcello emerges as a figure in whom we can believe."<sup>38.</sup>

Reviews, while praising Lee's realism, refrain from detail and hardly mention concerns such as violence, sadism, sex, and religious hypocrisy or why Porcello ran and from what. The reviewers were concerned with the effect of the story and how to reconcile the effect with the technique which produced it.

It was left to Truth to exploit the sensational aspects. Before describing the effect of this publication it is of interest to note a letter from Werner Laurie to Lee dated December 18th 1935, which informs Lee that their home office is on a "Purity in Books" crusade, that he has just been fined £50 and 20g costs for the publication of a book which contained no specific passage that was improper, the whole volume tending to be suggestive. There had been three recent book prosecutions and two more were coming in January.... "In view of these facts I have had to

withdraw your ms. from my printer and regret to tell you it will be necessary if the ms. is to be published in England for you to go over it and cut out all passages that might be considered improper. If issued as it now stands I feel confident it would be stopped immediately.... It will still I believe remain a fine story and one that ought to be published."

39.

The parts that required modifying or deleting are not entirely meaningful in isolation and difficult to locate as ms. and book page numbering do not match. Nor do these parts seem any more suggestive or explicit than many which remain. Some examples with ms. numbering are as follows:

- IOI The gymnastics of sex seemed dull and stupid. Substitute 'was' for 'seemed' or omit sentence altogether. "He had no inkling of the profound emotional joys" ... a most dangerous remark.
- II0 Leave out: "lips to lips".
- 340 Omit "his healthy lust - torn.
- 341 Omit "While Milly ate figs or dates he explored the mysteries of her body.

Truth published TH in thirteen instalments which ran from September 16th to December 9th, 1936. One hundred pounds was paid for the serial rights, a firm indication of value in early post-depression years. The serial caused widespread interest throughout New Zealand and according to Truth November 4th, 1936, hundreds of letters reached the author. After the first and subsequent episodes some of these letters were published. They testified to the authenticity of the book and some identified Jack Lee as the boy they used to know. The letters were "a tribute that pleased me better than any of those of the critics." 40.

People of all classes went into Truth's office with information about

the days of Burnham.

It has been affirmed that Beck, the first superintendent of Child Welfare, was aided by Lee in his campaign to abolish the Industrial School system with the possible implication that Lee's novels helped. However, the last Industrial School, the Burnham one, was closed in 1918 by Beck,<sup>41.</sup> then head of the Industrial Schools and Special Schools sections of the Education department. The novels were not in print at that time. Neither was Lee then a member of parliament. Nevertheless, near the end of Beck's career attempts were made to reintroduce disciplinary methods of an earlier day. These attempts were resisted. "The fact that Mr Lee's books COP and TH had been published and widely read must have helped Mr Beck in his resistance because they created a public opinion largely opposed to industrial school methods... influencing public opinion is an important achievement."<sup>42.</sup>

### (iii) Civilian Into Soldier

Although published in 1937 CIS was written almost ten years earlier. To say that "structurally and in style it continues the advance shown by TH over COP" is ironically inaccurate. The unnamed Evening Post review also declared CIS better than All Quiet on the Western Front but that as another war was looming on the horizon it was less pleasant to read the realities.

Adverse moral criticism appears in The Wairarapa Standard which condemns Lee as M.P. for writing CIS. The book "contains so much offensive matter that it is unfit to be placed on the shelves of a respectable library or in the hands of a decent woman." Vulgarisms are objected to.

The attacks on high commanders are thought insulting. Indignation is expressed at the favour given to prostitutes in preference to other society women caring for New Zealanders. The article concludes: "is it possible that the author is attached to a ministry that claims to be imbued with Christian ideals?"<sup>43.</sup>

"G.H.M." in the N.Z. Radio Record considered it right that the part played by prostitutes in winning the war should be made clear to the public. The book as a whole is "a magnificent piece of stark realism". He would not go so far as to agree with O.N. Gillespie that CIS was probably the finest war story in the English language but it was one of the finest and certainly the best that had come from New Zealand; in few novels had style been more suited to subject matter.<sup>44.</sup>

Another commentator in 1937 refers to it as a great book but not for every one. "In parts it is raw meat."<sup>45.</sup>

A review by D.O. Wall in 1937 is illuminating. He found it "crude but terribly alive;" "the descriptive power overwhelming, most compelling and horrible in the battle scenes;" "in many ways a bitter book but also funny." "Purely as a novel, that is as a well lighted stageful of soberly imagined puppets enacting an intimately plotted pageant more finished and symmetrical than reality, I don't think CIS quite as good as Lee's earlier novels. But it is a beast of an altogether different breed. It has a fine turbulence of spirit that makes it a much greater book." This appears to be the first explicit application of other than traditional criteria for judging Lee. Yet he concludes, Lee "writes with force rather than

elegance" as though elegance were superior.

An unidentified clipping states life as depicted by Mr Lee is "sheer rubbish ... his picture of the brutal sergeant major is an impossible creation." <sup>46.</sup> Lee, in a footnote, writes: "CIS is a book ordinary soldiers praised. Critics who denied the authenticity did so because they liked neither its underlying philosophy nor its morals or because they had not experienced trench warfare and thought it overdone."

Vanguard in a letter to Lee in 1934 expressed doubt as to the value of CIS calling it autobiographical material in non-autobiographical form. Guy was considered to be not credible and not an individual until the raffling of a pair of binoculars. The planned offensive part was magnificent and moving but merely an account of warfare. It could scarcely be called a war novel.

Lee's interest in exactitude may be illustrated by his reply to Werner Laurie who accepted the book and who thought "Barbed Wire" might be a better selling title. Lee wrote back in 1936 to say he would prefer the name CIS and wanted the sub title: "A study in Nervous Social and Material Disintegration."

As with Lee's other novels the published commentary concerning CIS reveals impact and controversy. There is a decreasing amount for each book shown by the relative number of commentaries and by the sales figures. While CIS is highly valued its appeal is narrower. As part of a sequence of three books its significance grows.

## (iv) Later Criticism

47.

Frank Sargeson's commentary may be the first appraisal .

"Mr Lee must unquestionably draw the attention of everyone genuinely interested in the development of New Zealand literature." He writes of "three outstanding novels," and also uses the term: "spiritual autobiography." To see why Lee has not written a really great novel Sargeson compares COP with Huckleberry Finn. Sargeson favours the evocative method. Twain evokes childhood. "Success in the creation of this kind is evidence of genius of the highest order. Porcello's childhood is described from the point of view of a man of mature years who imparts into his description all the conclusions his experience has brought him." He thinks TH shows the author's shortcomings at their worst. "Even in particular scenes you sometimes feel he has passed over actual experience in favour of creating people and their setting out of general observation." He thinks CIS is probably Lee's best book, the disconcerting theorising there being in character. Lee writes at his soundest, Sargeson thinks, when closest to personal experience, but CIS, an intensely individual war novel, is not every man's war experience. Sargeson wonders if Lee's individualism will eventually turn out to his advantage and demonstrate he has the creative power of the great novelist.<sup>48.</sup> "He has not yet written a novel in which he himself, so far as such a thing is possible, does not appear." Lee's footnote to this opinion is, "Creative power is the bank. I could invent a novel a month. The hardest task I have ever been faced with is giving power to real experience."<sup>49.</sup> The Sargeson criticism is

undocumented but reference in it to CIS as a recently published third novel places the date at 1937. As it aims at a general assessment it has been included in this section of later comments and opinions. Nearly ten years pass before another attempt is made to place Lee.

Reid in 1946 calls Lee: "something of a critical problem." GOP he finds often crude and violent, sordid, the propaganda naked: "yet the book is informed with a passionate humanitarianism." It is the first time the tale of the underprivileged is told in New Zealand. TH he finds less sincere or impressive. CIS despite crudities of construction and style has much to commend it as a picture of the common man at war. Reid objects to the political and social propaganda he finds in the novels.

Rhodes in 1947 writes; "the politician, the propagandist and the novelist are so combined in his person that it is easier to examine his political career than it is to estimate his importance as a writer." Rhodes doubts if you can answer precisely the question when does art become propaganda and when, more important, does propaganda become art. He admires Lee's iconoclasm. GOP is claimed as Lee's best novel. If Lee's breaking of the rules of the artistic games are crimes, he says, then Lee shares common ground with many great writers. Rhodes finds it well nigh impossible to disentangle all the doubtful qualities but he is more moved by the artlessness of Lee than by some stories of Katherine Mansfield and Sargeson which may be more artistically satisfying. He is uncertain about what the phrase "artistically satisfying" implies and involves. He is certain, "that passages in GOP and in TH are capable of moving me in a way in which very little



New Zealand prose has moved me, and I am not prepared to say that the effect is due to the theme rather than the treatment of the theme".<sup>51.</sup>

In the same essay Rhodes argues that suspense in TH is maintained either because of the author's skill or the reader's conviction that here is the material of life.

Rhodes also considers Lee has captured aspects of the New Zealand scene in a more profound way than anything presented in Cresswell's autobiography. Where else in New Zealand writing, he asks, has the aspiration of those hungry for life found adequate expression? "In terms of the art of the novel he may not be a great writer but as far as New Zealand is concerned an important one. He points the way to a fiction of social meaning."<sup>52.</sup>

The unanswered question is: do the "defects" complained of, carelessness, insensitivity to form, overemphasis, outweigh the "virtues" of truth, sincerity, poignancy, courage and honesty?

In a recent (1969) statement Rhodes says: "the effect in much of the book COP is due to the powerful expression of the theme."<sup>53.</sup>

David Ballantyne wrote to Lee in 1949: "... I mentioned COP in an article I did recently for The New York Times. I said it was the only book New Zealand cared to see reprinted."<sup>54.</sup>

Burton in 1958 advocates flamboyance, colour, variety and flexibility. He regards literature as a dynamic act which must be spontaneous. He praises COP as "probably the first book by a New Zealander to make a profound impression not on a small literary group only but on the community at large," but he says: "There is scarcely enough imaginative treatment to make it a novel rather than straight autobiography."<sup>55.</sup>

Davin in 1956 dismisses Lee in two sentences (Hyde, Mulgan, Sargeson, Davin, Guthrie Wilson, and Courage are given two paragraphs each and,

with the exception of Hyde, illustrative extracts. He compares COP and Man Alone: "Again John A. Lee in COP had given such a point of view but he was writing very close to autobiography whereas Mulgan was not. In his novel he relies on memory, it is his memory of things he has observed and not of actions where he had himself been the underdog." <sup>56.</sup> It would be of interest to discover the original manuscript which Lee in Delinquent Days (p35) claims "coloured" Man Alone, in order to gauge the depth of Mulgan's debt to Lee.

Holcroft in 1964 recalls that COP was praised on its first appearance by critics ready to welcome a new and strong note of realism in New Zealand fiction. Admitting that "the book has moving scenes" he says that "the man on the soap box is seldom silent." Holcroft is also concerned about the paucity of imitators or followers. He also implies exaggeration: "Poor children were with us; but in my experience they don't seem to have been numerous." In addition Holcroft thinks that as "most of us have memories of a childhood lacking in drama, or a drama contained in little things, visible only to us, only poets such as Katherine Mansfield and Janet Frame can describe them." <sup>57.</sup> It would be of interest to know if the reception of Beyond the Breakers and Brazilian Daughter determined Mr Holcroft's opinion. Pearson in <sup>58.</sup> "Fretful Sleepers" also objected to Lee's truth.

Gordon in 1965 notes Man Alone as the first modern New Zealand novel, and that the main defects of COP are typical of those of the pre-1939 period. He thinks they contain too many happenings, that they are often autobiographical, structurally weak, without memorable characters or philosophic viewpoint. They do contain excellent back-

grounds however. They do not satisfy the critical reader.<sup>59.</sup>

Jean Stevens in 1966 regards Lee's novels COP and TH<sup>as</sup> historically of major importance and intrinsically worth serious attention. She regards TH as Lee's best novel. It has thematic unity and fewer explanations clog the movement. COP is said to contain emotional overwriting. But for all the technical errors of COP and TH "there is none to compare with them in power." For her, CIS has no centre and lacks restraint and Guy never comes to life.<sup>60.</sup>

McCormick in 1947 considered the best episodes of COP "must rank high in the scale of New Zealand writing." What he refers to as a fault is said to mar TH and CIS more seriously but, "the trilogy ... was an important addition to New Zealand life not only on account of its intrinsic qualities but also because it helped destroy some of the comfortable illusions which had grown up round this country's social conditions and its history. This is not to belittle Lee's works, for a people bemused by false visions and blind to the world about them cannot claim to be mature."<sup>61.</sup>

McCormick in 1959 states that it is an open question whether COP is a good or bad novel. Although there is too much unassimilated descriptive matter and undisguised propaganda it is infinitely more than a social document. The best episodes show an imaginative quality. "The deficiencies of style and construction only mar COP; they do not outweigh its great merits." He goes on to say it is not in the first rank of fiction because of its defects.<sup>62.</sup>

McCormick in 1964 finds in a New Zealand literature course at Leeds that "COP seemed to have grown in stature and was generally admired by

63.  
students."

Two recent references conclude this section. Shadbolt in The  
64.  
Shell Guide to New Zealand (1968) refers to Lee as "the most effective  
chronicler of New Zealand poverty." Cross in the same year in The  
New Zealand Listener comparing Katherine Mansfield and Lee, preferring  
65.  
Lee, writes: "In Lee, the lesser artist, is more truth." A third comment  
by another practising writer will be introduced in the section, on  
propaganda.

It is fitting that Lee should have the last word, (already written  
in his first publication GOP) on the critic: "His own carcass  
unattractive, he yet excites attention by wounding someone greater.  
The desire to wound is not the cause; the critic is kindly but he has  
a desire to be noticed." (p.49)

The investigation of the most damaging charges in this chapter will  
form the subject matter of the next four chapters.