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Country of the Risen King: An Anthology of Christian Poetry (Book Review)

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Book Review

The Country of the Risen King; An Anthology of Christian Poetry. Compiler, Merle Meeter. Baker Book House, \$12.95. 446 pp. Reviewed by Dr. B. Marie VanderSchaaf, Department of English, Dordt College.

This anthology, edited by former Dordt professor Merle Meeter, contains a great diversity of poetic voices but a uniformity of poetic quality. Included in it are 100 contemporary poets and 30 historic Christian poets, with two-thirds of the space devoted to the contemporary poets. The choice to emphasize the contemporary poets was a wise one, since it is in his selection and publication of these modern writers that Professor Meeter makes his greatest contribution to the study of literature in this collection. Many of the poems included in the first part have been available only in scattered issues of various magazines, a situation which made it very difficult for a serious student to keep up with contemporary Christian poetry.

The short biographical index reveals that the diversity of poetic styles is reflected in the diversity of backgrounds of the poets. We find many religious traditions represented: Baptists, Quakers, and Presbyterians, missionaries, monks, pietists and activists; but the most well represented are the Reformed Calvinists. Sietze Buning, Henrietta Ten Harmsel, John Timmerman, Clarence Walhout, and Mildred Zylstra from Calvin are there; as are Paul Borgman from Northwestern;

and Hugh Cook, Merle Meeter, and numerous students past and present from Dordt—Carol Addink Van Klompenburg, Dave DeGroot, Sandy Van Den Berg, E. Neil Culbertson, Bonnie Kuipers, and Dorann Williams.

Established poets for a wider audience such as John Leax, Luci Shaw, Eugene Warren, and Marie J. Post are also included in the section of contemporary poets. However, the most well-known of all, and probably the best, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden, are represented by only one poem apiece. This is probably because of the prohibitive cost of royalties due the estates of these two poets.

The section of historical Christian poetry contains all the standard poets: Donne, Milton, Hopkins, Herbert, etc., as well as a few unknowns who are included on the basis of "the unique worthiness of form and content in a small number of their poems." The amount of space devoted to Herbert and Hopkins amounts to one-fourth of the entire section, which seems disproportionate. Instead of including the whole of "The Wreck of the Deutschland," which is readily available in other sources, the compiler could have used the space either to give a fuller treatment to another poet already included or to expand the coverage of this section to other poets. The principle of selection used in this section is not entirely clear. Obviously there were many good poems which could not be included, but one would expect that the ones chosen would follow some pattern. The book, however, seems to be attempting to be

all things to all readers, and so it turns out to be neither a collection designed with the specialized reader in mind, nor one tailored to the needs of a general audience. There is duplication of much material that anyone seriously interested in Christian poetry would already have, and inclusion of much material beyond the scope of the inexperienced reader.

The extremely short (three-page) third section, "Medieval Poems, Renaissance Madrigals, and Spirituals," is too short to be of much help to either a specialist, who would already be familiar with the material, or to a newcomer to the field,

who would have too little to go on to form any significant understanding of the genres.

The real strength of this anthology lies in the first section. Professor Meeter's judgments on quality are sound ones. In dealing with the works of contemporary writers, it is both more difficult and more important to have good critical sense—there are no time-honored judgments of the poet to fall back on. Every page of contemporary poetry in this anthology shows the critical acumen of the compiler. This alone is enough to make *The Country of the Risen King* worthwhile.