

HUNGRY FOR KNOWLEDGE?

Three Writers Who Think the Public is More Serious-minded than is Generally Supposed

IN a recent article in the "New Statesman," Professor Joad argued that the chief cause of the popularity of the BBC's Brains Trust session is the hunger of people for knowledge. Something like the same view is taken by Rebecca West, who complains (in a recent issue of "Picture Post") of the reluctance of the BBC to treat its listeners with intellectual respect. On the other hand, C. Day Lewis complained not so long ago in "Picture Post" (in an article on the publishing business) that, while people read more books than they read before the war, they do not read better books. But, he said, they might if they were available: and that publishers are neglecting the opportunity the war has given them of producing good books without financial risk.

One curious fact mentioned by Professor Joad was that he had been compelled to count up to 104 among the passengers in a suburban train before coming to one who was reading a book, and that the title of this book was "No Orchids for Miss Blandish."

It would be reckless to say how much better or worse the position in New Zealand is, but one of our staff who applied the same kind of test in a railway carriage found four book readers among 72 passengers, and another who applied the test in a harbour ferry saw seven books in a cabin occupied by 29 passengers.

The day following, the number of readers had increased to 14, but the passengers had increased to 53. Tram and bus tests are not very useful, since only the most fortunate (or most reckless) find it possible to read in such places, and travellers on inter-island steamers usually go early to their cabins. If they go to read—as some certainly do—they do not often carry their books where these can be seen and counted.

Here are the statements to which we have just referred:

C. E. M. Joad



FOR the root causes of the popularity of the Brains Trust I think one must go deep. I venture to suggest three. First, that there exists among people an accumulated fund of unexpended seriousness. There has been a good deal of sporadic evidence of this during the war. Army classes and discussion groups, A.B.C.A. lectures, Mass Observation reports indicating renewed interest in religious questions, the revival of music to which the success of C.E.M.A. testifies—all these are straws that show which way the wind is blowing. The Brains Trust is, I think, the outstanding piece of evidence. Nor is the fact surprising. There have been ages crueller, wickeder, more brutal, but never so silly an age as the one before the war. Eight out of nine of us did no serious reading of any kind after we left school at 14; only 10 per cent had contact with any religious organisation, and by most of us the questions with which religion has historically concerned itself were ignored. It was not that they were not answered; They were not asked. Very few young people, less than two per cent of those under 23, were members of a political party.

Under-Stimulated Minds

The Press, I think, consistently underrated the underlying seriousness of a public whom it fed with crosswords,

football pools, crime stories, sex stories and snippets of gossip and gobbets of news, on the assumption that the powers of the average man's concentration were exhausted by two minutes' reading on any topic. Women in particular suffered from under-stimulated minds.

It was this unexploited vein of seriousness in the public that the Brains Trust tapped.

Secondly, there is the failure of popular education to satisfy the people's needs or to win their interests.

"On a train journey not one in a hundred," I said, "can be seen reading a book." "But that," I admonished myself, "is plainly an exaggeration." So I set out to put it to the test. The train, from Edinburgh to London, takes normally nine hours, and on this occasion was an hour late. It was full of soldiers. They had long exhausted their somewhat slender resources of conversation; the mild delights of looking out of the window had palled hours ago; there they sat, hour after hour, bored and low, and to not one in a hundred did it occur to relieve their boredom by reading. For I went through the train counting—counting soldiers and airmen of all ranks, and I reached number 104 before I found my first book reader. He was reading *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*.

The Motive of "Playing Safe"

Thirdly, the Brains Trust broke through, if only for a time, the glaze of BBC gentility. The BBC is part of the Civil Service at least in this, that its dominating objective is to avoid a row as symbolised by a question in Parliament. There may be good reasons for this attitude in a Government department, but it seems to me to be disastrous in an institution one of whose objects should be the promotion and stimulation of thought. Thought is formed and guided by the vigorous advocacy of different points of view, irrespective of their truth or falsehood; yet we look to the radio in vain for the vigorous expressions of strongly-held opinions. Where the canvas of controversy should be painted—overpainted, if you will—in blacks and whites, the BBC gives us only a monochrome of grey. The world is as full as ever of fools and scoundrels, but whatever is said must not offend the scoundrels or provoke the fools. The expression of strongly-held opinion always offends somebody. Therefore, it is concluded, there must be no strong expression of

vigorously-held opinions. The BBC, in fact, proceeds upon the assumption that nothing must be said over the microphone which could produce a ripple of disagreement in the still waters of the minds of Tory maiden aunts, born two-thirds of a century ago and living on—for such do not die—into a different age in the closes of cathedral towns. When Quintin Hogg once attacked me on a Brains Trust with heat and feeling, calling me an old man whose views had helped to bring on this war in the past and, if persisted in, would bring on another war in the future, there was the devil of a fuss. The BBC was deluged with protests, and I received a couple of hundred letters from soft-hearted persons anxious to express their sympathy with the victim of Mr. Hogg's unprovoked attack. For my part, I was unable to see what the fuss was about. Why shouldn't a man say what he thinks, and say it forcibly as he thinks it? It was only because the BBC had for so long soothed our ears with radio syrup, administered to us by decorous voices, inculcating platitudes with Oxford accents, that people were shocked.

Ban on Political Discussion

Now, for a time the Brains Trust broke through this tradition. In its early days, when the Trust was comparatively unimportant, we said what we liked and answered questions on religion and politics. Presently, religion dropped out altogether—under pressure, the BBC made a clean breast of this—and the questions on politics grew fewer and fewer, although the BBC never admitted that there was a virtual ban on political discussion.

Howard Thomas is, no doubt, right in thinking that the popularity of the Brains Trust was largely due to the interplay of personalities but, as the hubbub increased, one was bound to ask oneself, popularity to what end? And, for me, the end was education. The Brains Trust served this end by virtue of its ability to guide listeners through the rapids of controversy and to plunge them at last into the dark and bracing waters of thought. I venture, then, to claim that to an institution which has increasingly come to equate controversy with sin, the Brains Trust has done service by bringing back something of the great English traditions of discussion, disagreement, plain speaking, even on occasion of invective.

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