

READERS of the daily papers will have observed the ripples of controversy spreading on the subject of education. The secondary schools were in it from the beginning: they had an old quarrel with the authorities over their salaries, a quarrel which dates from pre-war days. The primary service was quickly involved: it bore within it the seed of strife—the New Education—already in some circles scarcely to be mentioned without blasphemy. The headmasters of the private schools have recently opened what promises to be a heavy raid of leaflets. The Church has not been slow to raise its voice. I have no figures, but a strong impression that (in the newspapers) the percentage of space devoted to education is rising. John Citizen is beginning to prick up his ears. Even — and this is what prompted this article—the university is clearing its throat and preparing to have its say.

The latest speaker is Professor J. Rutherford, of the Department of History, Auckland University College. His remarks, however, are not concerned so much with history, as with the reading and writing of English and with intellectual standards in New Zealand students generally. The professor minces no words: he speaks "trumpet-tongued." Roughly one-quarter of his History I. class of 147 students are, he says, "illiterate in the sense that they cannot write English sentences reasonably clear in meaning and reasonably correct in grammar and spelling, such as would be required in the Sixth Standard. Pupils have not been taught at school to read accurately and profitably, and the average capacity for clear, relevant thought is remarkably low." These comments have also been publicly approved by Professor J. R. Elder, the retiring Professor of History at Otago. The professors have opened a rich field of argument. We are all interested to some degree in our own language. We are its users, its moulders and makers: if we are not teachers of it, we have at least all been taught it. We like to think, also, that we are a literate nation, and it comes as a shock that so many of those who should be our elect are classed as illiterate. We can, of course, dismiss these remarks as intemperate or dyspeptic, but a distinct uneasiness remains. Before we gird ourselves, then, to destroy the wretched secondary school teachers, who seem the immediate authors of all this, or to drive out the Director of Education, or to purge primary school and kindergarten, it would be well to scrutinise our social conscience a little more narrowly and allot responsibility where it is due.

Anxiety About Cultural Standards

The very first thing to observe is that anxiety about cultural standards,



"It is the schoolboy who comes off best"

ENGLISH AS WE WRITE IT

*"We Should Look to
Other Sources Than
Just The Schools
For The Causes
of Decline"—Says*



★ DR. K. J. SHEEN, ★
in this article for "The
Listener"

and recognition of the decline in ability to use, understand, and appreciate our own tongue, is far from being confined to New Zealand. This fact alone would put us on our guard against any specifically local cure. E. G. Biaggini, in his book, *English in Australia*, issued in 1933 by the Australian Council for Educational Research, has this to say on this very point:

"Merely to say then that this is the outcome of wrong methods of teaching by teachers unfitted for their work would be a false and extravagant assertion; rather does it seem more reasonable to conclude that these ways of thought are so general that their roots run deep in the ordinary mind and that there they are continually nourished by prevailing social influences. To tax the teacher alone with a general sin, would, I think, be most unfair, and a proper share of blame must be placed on the shoulders of the parent, the parson, the public man, and the Press." (Add "radio and cinema"—K.J.S.). "It is true, perhaps, that a teaching genius could effect wonders, but if a part of the function of the normal school-master is to overcome a host of surrounding evil influences, and to undo in a few hours what less enlightened people have done in many, it is altogether too much to expect from him, and he is engaged in a losing battle. And in a civilised world, at any rate, this is as it should be; for the business of the teacher is to develop and not to impose a culture. If this proper state of things is reversed and culture becomes a class-room rather than a social product, we shall get from the school prigs rather than gentlemen, pedants rather than cultivated men. A language is a living thing, and those who speak English best invariably learn it in private life."

Practical Tests

Biaggini's book and the succeeding volume *The Reading and Writing of*

English (1936) deserve to be read by anyone interested in this problem, if only because they substitute for hasty impressions and unsupported assertions a carefully documented survey over at least one portion of the field—the exercise of discrimination and taste in reading. Since they come from our closest neighbours, they are necessarily of particular value, and the state of affairs they disclose in Australia in the city of Blankville could easily be paralleled in New Zealand. The author himself says: "There is no reason to suppose that towns in the other British Dominions, or in the United States of America, or in England itself, would make a better showing." The method adopted by Biaggini was to submit representative passages of English, good and bad, and ask a wide range of students to select the better passages, and to comment on their selection. The group, which included university students in their second and third years, commerce students (first and second years), training college students, and schoolboys, totalled over 200. The tests vary in degree of difficulty but are usually exceedingly simple, involving a "comparison of good literature with absurdity." Further, use is made of the English material offered by advertising and the Press, so that the tests are not strictly literary. This is all to the good. As F. R. Leavis says of Biaggini's work: "Its peculiar virtue is that it starts at so unpretentious a level. The distinctions of value represented by his groups of passages will hardly be questioned either by his 'intelligent layman' or by the sophisticated sceptic who argues with Arnold Bennett that 'taste is still relative.'"

The extracts given are too long to quote satisfactorily, but the results are interesting and at times surprising. In general they confirm all that any critic of English among students could say. University students fare no better than the other groups and, indeed, of them all it is the whining schoolboy with his satchel who comes off the best. This last fact is again a very clear indication that we should look to other sources than just the schools for the causes of decline in English. Biaggini warns us specifically against expecting miracles even if improvements were made in the existing teaching methods of English:

"Were existing repressions in present teaching methods removed, there is no implication that a cultural millennium would follow. To remove repressions is good, but it is a negative rather than a positive process, and were it done, it would produce improvements rather than work miracles. Genius and ability can work within, or if need be, defy any

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"To encourage the others"