

LISTENER

Incorporating N.Z. RADIO RECORD

Every Friday

Price Threepence

SEPTEMBER 29, 1944

Radio To-morrow

LAST week we reprinted some comments by a radio critic who is one of Britain's younger social historians: Tom Harrison of Mass Observation. This week we draw attention to a difficult, interesting, but obviously dangerous session introduced by the ABC in Melbourne: a political Forum of the Air. The common factor in both cases was the sense of experiment. Harrison, who was saying good-bye to his *Observer* readers before going away with the Army, emphasised the importance of "seeing beyond the immediate." Things would be happening soon in radio which "very few, even at the heart of it, can yet visualise." Therefore it would have to be watched, not merely by the newspapers and those whose professional job it is to discuss such things, but by the whole community, or the world's ears "will soon be drowned in a volume of uncontrolled sound . . . the consequences of which may be unimaginably lowering to the wisdom and decency of man." In the Australian experiment, so far as it has gone—some of our readers must have broken in on it—restraint has not yet been lost, but it was a daring move to devote the second session to an open debate on Birth Control, with the three principal speakers Dr. Norman Haire, the chief Australian exponent of Birth Control on the technical side, Colin Clark, a Catholic economist, and Dame Enid Lyons, widow of a former Prime Minister and the mother of five sons and six daughters. It would have been daring to stage such a debate in a studio, and it must have seemed quite reckless to stage it in a public hall with the audience participating in the discussion; but it was done, and done with complete dignity and success. The discussion was certainly heated. Yet no one can suppose that such an experiment could be extended indefinitely—that whatever can be discussed in the street or round the fireside can be debated before the microphone, or that it is possible to spread "tolerance, reason, and justice" (the announced aim of the Australian session) by broadcasting intolerance and un-reason.

LETTERS FROM LISTENERS

"BARBARA AT HOME"

Sir,—I gather from "Materfamilias's" comments on the series "Barbara at Home" that Mary Scott's work in radio is new to her. This is a pity. Mrs. Scott has given many radio talks, and has thrown much light on the sterner as well as the lighter side of country life. Possibly it is more important that Mrs. Scott should discuss problems of rural adolescence, marital incompatibility, or the vexed question of freehold and leasehold, than that she should present the comedy of Barbara and her husband spending a hectic day getting to the polling booth, only to cancel out their votes, but there must be a lot of humour in country as well as town life, and shouldn't we be grateful for anyone who distills it out? There is precious little fun in our native literature. The extent to which our younger writers are filled with inspissated gloom is the subject of widening comment. Fortunately Mrs. Scott is not young enough to regard life as little or nothing but a bad joke.

"OLD FOGGY" (Wellington).

Sir,—I would like to say in answer to "Materfamilias" that never before have I enjoyed a serial so much as "Barbara At Home." It is very true of backblock life—although most housewives may be more efficient than Barbara! Still, the predicaments are very similar, and we live in the backblocks and we should know. We were very sorry to hear that the last episode was the final one, and hope that they can be continued at some future date. We enjoyed many a chuckle over Barbara's adventures, and the "pleasant, but not very important half-hour's listening" to "Materfamilias," was a very real piece of enjoyment to us, and one which we looked forward to all the week. The narration was also a pleasant change and surprise, with no dramatisation. Whoever read it should be commended for his splendid performance. He was so exactly our conception of Barbara's husband.

Perhaps other backblocks listeners will back me up when I say "Give us more New Zealand serials for New Zealand listeners, and not so many raucous American programmes. Give us more of "Barbara At Home."

"SPRAY" (Marlborough).

Sir,—"Materfamilias" seems to have missed the whole point of this series. Of course farmers' wives are all "Materfamilias" believes them to be, and more so; but a very great number of them are, thank goodness, as full of the love of fun as they are of capabilities. It would be a grim kind of life if one could not take one's funniest moments and make the most of them.

This is what Mary Scott does so admirably, and she has been a backblocks wife for many years of her life. Nobody feels the pulse of the farming woman more delicately and more understandingly than she does, and this is partly because she most truly belongs. I, too, am a farmer's wife, and I can honestly say that, in my neighbourhood alone, I know that these broadcasts have been truly looked forward to—not only by the womenfolk, but by the men, too. A number of tired and work-worn husbands have stayed awake and laughed long and loudly as the stories unfolded themselves step by step.

Better still, I know of returned men (so quiet one wonders often what they are thinking) who, disliking the noise and melodrama of the usual serial, have listened and laughed delightedly at these broadcasts. To succeed in this way must surely deserve greater praise than "a pleasant, if not very important, half-hour's listening!"—FARMER'S WIFE (Waikato)

Sir,—"Materfamilias" in her criticism of the serial "Barbara at Home" reminds me a little of an acquaintance of mine who, after studying the current week's comic strip of Old Soldier Sam, remarked in a solemn voice: "I don't really think they should be allowed to make fun of our gallant soldiers like that."

Mary Scott, in her more serious writings, has paid finer tribute to farmers' wives than any other New Zealand writer has done. As to whether Barbara herself is "phoney" or not, well, ask the opinion of a group of us who were discussing this particular serial over afternoon tea the other day. Yes, we were all farming women, all having experienced, in our time, unexpected guests, empty cupboards, soap that went wrong, and all the various crises that harrow poor Barbara's soul. And the general opinion of the gathering? It was that Barbara was exactly like ME!—ANOTHER BARBARA (Tauranga).

NEW ZEALAND SPEECH

Sir,—It is natural, since none of us cares to have his manner of speech criticised, that letters on this subject are coloured by prejudice. It is even to be expected, since most ears are tuned to the prevailing sounds, that the aesthetic aspect is also so coloured. After four years in England an encounter with New Zealand speech produced exactly the same effect which "standard" English produces on the indigenous New Zealander. It sounds sheepish and emasculated. The transformation of "you" and "yes" into "ee-yew" and "ee-yees" seemed extraordinarily weak and ugly. Here, these sounds are so well established that they pass unnoticed. A note on our speech in the theatre may be added. Dramatically our impoverishment of vowel sounds and neglect of consonants makes for inaudibility, monotony, and a sort of flattening-out of the dialogue. To any audience but an indigenous one, the lines would often be incomprehensible and for any play but an indigenous one, the manner of speech as unsuitable as Gallic gestures in a performance of *Journey's End*. The telephone gives a reasonable test. I have worked in a hospital office. Almost every telephone inquiry had to be repeated and that to regular operators who were well tuned to the dialect.

It is, perhaps, not a question of whether we should develop a dialect but of whether the dialect we develop is clear, serviceable, trenchant and flexible, or muffled, limited, feeble and monotonous. To argue about this is to argue about taste, which is to argue for ever.

NGAIO MARSH (Christchurch).

ANSWER TO CORRESPONDENT

"No Money—No Bombers" (Upper Hutt): Far too restrained. Surely you could think of worse things to call us than stupid, ignorant, dishonest and boss-ridden. Hoots, mon! "Holy Willie" did far better than that.—(Ed.).