

# THIS ENGLISH BUSINESS

*"The Position Is Really Not Quite So Sad As Is Made Out"*—Says A.M., in this article for "The Listener"



**D**R. K. J. SHEEN'S article, "English As We Write It," raises enough questions to fill with answers a whole issue of *The Listener*—and more power to him. I can only hope to touch briefly on a few points. When the late lamented Mr. Dooley considered the string of social conditions which showed that civilisation was going to the devil, he comforted himself with one thought—that it wasn't so. Though I am a good deal less well acquainted with research on the subject than Dr. Sheen, I am inclined to think that the position of the English tongue is really not quite so sad as is made out. At any rate, I suggest that a good deal more investigation may be necessary before we can be positive that our cultural standards, as reflected in our language and literature, are "tending to become lower."

We must not overlook the fact that, within a lifetime, there has been a vast change in the reading habits of peoples. Not so very many years ago only a

minority read. Now everybody reads. If we compare a whole society of to-day with that portion of it which used to read, the average taste to-day may be lower, but is it lower if we compare whole with whole? Quite true, a vast amount of rubbish is read to-day. But isn't it also true that more good literature is read than at any time in the past? Ask publishers who issue English classics. Look at the increasing output of well-written books of all kinds—new books and cheap editions of books a few years old. I am more and more impressed by the amount of competent writing that is offered. Whether we have great writers is a matter of dispute. It is less in dispute, I think, that there is a very large body of excellent writing. I suggest that in the last 50 years there have been more second and third-class writers of English than ever before—good seconds and thirds. The survival of great literary work is liable to deceive us into thinking that its age was uniformly golden. Every age has had its rubbish.

The teacher can do a great deal. All through society there are men and women who owe much to a teacher who was enthusiastic and discriminating (discrimination is useless without enthusiasm). Dr. Sheen, however, is quite right in contending that teachers can't do everything. The influences of home and society generally have to be reckoned. But that, surely, strengthens the case for improving the teaching of English on the lines suggested in the recent report. If young people are to surround their future children with the right cultural atmosphere, they should be properly prepared for the job.

## Outside Influences

As to influences outside the home, our old friend the Press is brought forward again. No doubt he isn't all he should be. He is still inclined to the use

(continued on next page)

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