

"THE LISTENER" does not often report a meeting — meetings where the discussion itself is likely to be of interest can usually be left to the daily papers. However, a public meeting was recently called in Wellington by the New Education Fellowship to discuss *The Films in Relation to Children and Child Delinquency*, and three speakers were chosen to go over the ground first. For those readers therefore who like to hear the place of the films in our life seriously discussed we now print an account of the meeting, by a staff reporter.

# FILMS and CHILDREN



THE chairman was W. J. Scott, lecturer in English at the Wellington Teachers' Training College, who has lately been engaged in making a survey of some of the out-of-school habits—film-going among them—of post-primary school children. He opened the meeting with brief references to some of the results of this survey; for instance, to the finding that boys go to the pictures more often than girls, although girls have the reading habit more developed than boys; and that New Zealand children don't go to the pictures as much as children in the United States or United Kingdom. There is in fact a large group in New Zealand (large in proportion to the similar groups in America and Britain) who don't go at all. After laying these facts on the table as it were, Mr. Scott called on three experts to come forward and speak, and then make themselves available for brain-picking afterwards. They were Gordon Mirams ("G.M." of *The Listener*), E. S. Andrews, Producer of the Government Film Studios at Miramar, and Walter B. Harris, Director of Visual Aids in the Education Department. They spoke in that order.

Mr. Mirams opened by giving his reasons for regarding the subject as very

important, and the banning of children from undesirable films. But this, Mr. Mirams said, wouldn't work. For one thing, it wasn't working when a film recommended by the Censor for Adults could be screened on the same programme as one approved for Universal Exhibition.

As for imposing an age restriction, this might raise a very real practical difficulty. It was not so easy deciding whether a girl was 16 or only 15. Theatre managers should not be expected to make such a decision, when the responsibility really rested with the parents.

For what he called a negative, unrealistic, and defeatist attitude, Mr. Mirams wanted to substitute a positive attitude; to recommend, instead of forbidding; to select, instead of excluding. By calling for censorship and laws forbidding children to go to pictures, people were perhaps blaming the films for something that was really attributable to other causes—their own shortcomings as parents and teachers, perhaps, or the war conditions which made juvenile delinquency almost inevitable.

"It is amazing how some people can apparently talk for hours about child delinquency without mentioning what is surely an important point—that our nation has for more than five years been engaged in a war that has taken fathers away from home, put mothers in factories, and children on to the streets to look after themselves," he said. "Let's be tough on the films, but let us also be fair."

## Sex and Violence

Emphasis on sex and violence were probably the chief points objected to by those who wanted tighter rules. But they could scarcely object to the morals pointed in the plots, or the general conclusions reached, since Hollywood's own Hays Office saw to it that vice never escaped justice and the wicked were always punished in the end—more certainly than ever in real life. Lord Hewart, Lord Chief Justice of England, had said, "If virtue triumphed in actual life as regularly as on the films, this world might be an easier place both to police and to understand."

Anyway, Mr. Mirams went on, children were bored by love scenes as a rule. As for violence, the opinions of experts cancelled each other out. One high authority said the movies were a cause of crime, and a second high authority denied that there was any noticeable connection. But naturally, one might expect a child with latent

tendencies to delinquency to be encouraged if he went too often to certain kinds of film. It was hard to generalise; there were nervous types of children whose temperament made it unfair to allow them to see frightening films. But if we had to generalise, there were grounds for thinking that the normal child was tough and cheerfully callous.

## The Real Evils

Less obvious things than were generally complained of were the real danger—not only to children, but to adults—implicit themes, rather than spectacular incidents. For instance, the anti-social themes mentioned by Roger Manvell in the *Pelican Book Film*:

*The idea that WEALTH in the abstract is a good thing and the pursuit of it is all-important.*

*The idea that LUXURY, especially associated with women, is normal. A happy woman on the screen is one who enters the room with her arms full of parcels.*

*The idea that SEX is probably the most important sensation in life.*

*The idea that WOMEN should be judged satisfactory on the basis of desirability.*

*The idea that a SOCK IN THE JAW is the best answer to any argument.*

*The idea that to be FOREIGN is, ipso facto, to be under suspicion; and that to be Eastern is just horrible.*

*The idea that BRAINLESS PATRIOTISM is preferable to national self-criticism.*

"That is where I think the screen is most insidious and dangerous—especially to children," Mr. Mirams said. "Not so much in showing Frankenstein monsters and gangsters and red-hot kisses to youngsters and adolescents, but in presenting the ideas in that list as the normal, and therefore the approved pattern of conduct of the average citizen; and in doing so just at a time when the child is becoming aware of the big world outside the home and the playground."

## Constructive Suggestions

Turning to positive ideas, Mr. Mirams suggested making the best of what there is, and giving a special recommendation for films suited to children. Perhaps it would be possible for the Education Department to attach someone with special knowledge to the Censor's office to see all likely films and publicly recommend—in the advertisements—good films for children. He quoted Miss C. A. Lejeune, film critic to the *London Observer*: "The main danger of indiscriminate picture-going for children is not what they may learn, but what they may miss, without the pointer of an older experience to guide them."

It rested with responsible adults to organise the necessary guidance. Probably the film trade would be glad to

co-operate, whereas clamouring for more regulations would only make them organise their own resistance. Teachers ought to give a lead. There were of course some who regularly discussed films with their pupils, but we had nothing like the Four Star Clubs of America, a national association of boys' and girls' clubs which existed to encourage appreciation, and which constituted the junior member body of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures in America. Could not something be started here on similar lines? The Americans got past the stage of blaming films for delinquency years ago, and now were trying to use the films to counteract it.

Mr. Mirams ended by advocating in New Zealand something like the National Board of Review, in the U.S.A., which opposed censorship on principle, and advocated classification and selection as a means to raise the public standards of taste, and ultimately the standards of entertainment.

## "Perfectly Legitimate"

Mr. Andrews began by saying that he had felt even more annoyed than Mr. Mirams with the people who wanted to shut children out of the theatres. That would be interfering with the perfectly legitimate livelihood of honest people; and intelligent people, too.

"The people in the film industry are as intelligent as people in the New Education Fellowship," he said, "and they have children of their own. Their feelings are hurt when they're told they are monsters who are turning other people's children into delinquents. They would much rather have people who are interested in the question come to them, and say: 'Here's a problem: see if we can't get together and straighten it out.' If a bunch of intelligent people from here went to a bunch of intelligent people in the film industry and guaranteed to provide a good audience for a good film, I think the answer would be 'Yes, we'll put it on for you.'"



"Theatre managers should not be expected to make such a decision"

important, quoting Dr. Leo Calvin Rosten, an American who not long ago completed an investigation into the influence of the movies and came to the conclusion that the present education of most people in most countries is performed by the cinema, and that the film, not the school, the church, or the family, educates the masses.

## Banning Won't Work

The principal suggestion made locally for a solution of the problem thus presented has been a demand for more



"Bananas and beer are good . . . but you can misuse them"

Mr. Andrews cited the case of a neighbourhood theatre in one large suburb where the manager, on his own initiative, announced from the stage one week that on the following Saturday a special children's matinee would be arranged as an experiment, with good cartoons, interest films, and documentaries, instead of the usual feature film. It was packed out, and now the theatre was taking up to £28 each Saturday instead of the £8 or £10 formerly

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