

LETTERS FROM LISTENERS

(Continued from page 5)

DETECTIVE FICTION

Sir,—I think the reading and writing of detective stories is a comparatively harmless form of the blood-letting mentioned by De Quincey in the quotation below. This would account for its popularity among the professorial class who look on mankind as so much inchoate substance capable of being taught; among the legal profession who regard it as so much unruly substance to be tried, judged and confined; the medical profession who regard it as a huge physical experimental ground; and the reformer who despises that part of it that he can't convert to his view. Of course I am speaking in general: I know a man can be a professor even and not be washed up high and dry out of the stream of life and humanity, but here is the quotation:

"But still so it is, that turns in search of the picturesque are particularly apt to break up in quarrels. Perhaps on the principle which has caused a fact generally noticed, viz., that conchologists, butterfly fanciers, etc., are unusually prone to commit felonies because too little of a human interest circulates through their arid pursuits. The morbid irritation accumulates until the amateur rushes out with a knife, lets blood in some quarter, and so restores his own connection with the vitalities of human nature."

PADDLER (Dunedin).

Sir,—It is surprising to find several correspondents in recent issues of *The Listener* applauding the American critic Edmund Wilson in his childish tirade against detective fiction. Shakespeare, who knew all men, covers this attitude with Sir Toby's query to the serious-minded Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* (Act 2), "Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?"

In the early years of the present century, the detective novel was confined to the "Mystery of a Hansom Cab" school, and rather looked down upon by the best people; but a change came when writers like A. E. W. Mason and Georgette Heyer began to devote attention to the crime story, until eventually this type of fiction became so popular with the intelligentsia that a Crime Club was formed in England, with the headmaster of one of the three great public schools as chairman, to protect the public from debasing literature. It is significant that both of Mr. Wilson's supporters have a sneaking regard for Dorothy Sayers, and this is not surprising, as the works of this author are well up to the standard of modern fiction for characterisation and humour, and the same applies to the famous Agatha Christie and many others not so famous. I am afraid that Mr. Wilson is a "small voice crying in the wilderness," with neither rhyme nor reason in his cry.

J. W. KEALY (St. Heliers).

Sir,—I wish to assure your correspondent Gordon Ingham that I do not regard detective fiction with lofty contempt. On the contrary, I marvel at the ingenuity displayed by the writers; but the question is—readable and entertaining as some of them are—do they merit

an exalted position in our national literature? Edmund Wilson's attack is timely because it may influence many to be more discriminate in their reading.

Is it not strange that, in an age where historical and biographical novels are more plentiful and more attractively presented than ever, large sections of our public look no higher than Crime novels? Similarly there is an abundance of delightful children's books, yet many children seem to read only "comics" outside school hours. I think that the only people who are taken in are those who buy indiscriminately every new book that the purveyors of crime fiction care to concoct.

I gather from the reading of a review and a glance at the book jacket that "Died in the Wool" consumers—a very apt word!—may now learn of a novel way of disposing of the body—in a bale of wool! This illustrates the subtle change which has taken place in detective fiction—the emphasis is no longer on the detective heroes—Sherlock Holmes, Poirot, the Black Moth, etc., but rather on the ingenious, premeditated technique of the murderer. The bringing of the malefactor to justice seems to be merely routine work. I.V.H.L. (Hawera).

FREEDOM OF THE AIR

Sir,—As one often away from home, who reads his *Listener* at a much later date than most, can I be pardoned a late remark on Mr. Hulbert's letter. One cannot but admire the big-hearted way

(continued on next page)

Eleven V.C.'s At One Time

Unique Broadcast on November 8

AS everybody knows, 11 New Zealand winners of the Victoria Cross were gathered together recently in Wellington as the guests of the Government. During their visit they were invited in a body to the NBS studios to make a recording. First of all the roll was called. This tells listeners the names of this company of valour, and each man's response is heard. Then the V.C. winners were asked one by one to give a message, and they did so. They spoke of the R.S.A. appeal on Rose Day, November 9, in various parts of New Zealand, when people will be asked to subscribe to a fund for the general welfare of men and women in the services. "We can't give listeners your portraits," said the interviewer, "but we can give them your voices." So 11 V.C. winners spoke to the people of New Zealand.

This unique series of messages is to be broadcast from the main National Stations this Thursday, November 8 (the evening before Rose Day) at 6.30 p.m. following the 6.15 p.m. BBC News.

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