

CLASS OF '97 HAD NO WORRIES

D ECEMBER and January are pretty grim months for some people: everyone under 16, nearly everyone under 18, and about half the population under 25 have just received, or are about to receive, examination results. Even the most irritatingly confident have moments when they pray that their papers might be lost—a prayer which has been answered only once in New Zealand, when the S.S. Mataura and all the 1897 degree papers sank in the Straits of Magellan.

The other day we heard of a man who in 1897 had sat for his M.A. It was a long time ago certainly, but even so he seemed to take the whole thing very calmly.

"How did you feel when you knew that all your work was at the bottom of the ocean?"

"I didn't worry. We didn't worry about things in those days."

"What were the reactions of the public, the newspapers?"

"They didn't bother much. They weren't very interested."

"What arrangements were made about the degrees?"

"B.A. students were granted theirs on a favourable report from their professors. M.A.'s were granted too, but without Honours—if you wanted honours you had to sit again."

"What did you do?"

"I sat again."

"Did you study the entire course again?"

"No, only from September. I was studying for my LL.B."

"But you got your Honours?"

"Yes. I was lucky. The examiners set three essays in English. The same sub-

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ject was in both papers and I'd picked it the first year."

"What did most of the students do?"

"They were thankful to have got their degrees and didn't bother about Honours."

"Would you say that anyone's career actually suffered because of the need for an extra year to gain the highest qualifications?"

He said "No" as though that were a silly question.

"Do you think the sinking of the Mataura important in any way in the history of New Zealand education?"

"I'm old; it doesn't matter what I think."

He got up and showed us a photograph of his graduation class. There were 15 for the whole of Otago University—all dead but our friend. He related their achievements—all of them solid. One was a boot-factory boy, the New Zealander who did most towards winning the 1914-18 war. When the war broke out the German shells had twice the penetration and their ships twice the resistance of the British. As the principal British chemist doing research into metal alloys, this man reversed these figures.

"He was the greatest scholar New Zealand has ever produced, not excluding Rutherford. His name was Mellor."

"But did the loss of the papers matter at all—later?"

"It enlivened the general meeting of the Senate. I remember Sir James Hector, who was Chancellor at the time, telling Sir James Prendergast sadly that his nephew Mr. Knight had failed—knowing all the time that the papers had gone down."

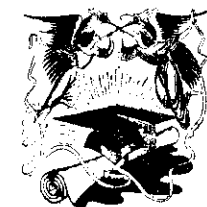
"Were there any more permanent results?"

"Only that it gave those in favour of local examinations a peg to hang their arguments on."

"Do you think local examinations are a good thing?"

He didn't—in fact he doesn't think there is much good at all in our modern education. He thinks it is entirely superficial, that our standard has fallen lamentably since we no longer import English professors or sit English examinations. He thinks that unless we take a sharp pull in the opposite direction to which most of our education reformers are pushing us we shall be as irrevocably sunk as the Mataura.

—S.P.McL.



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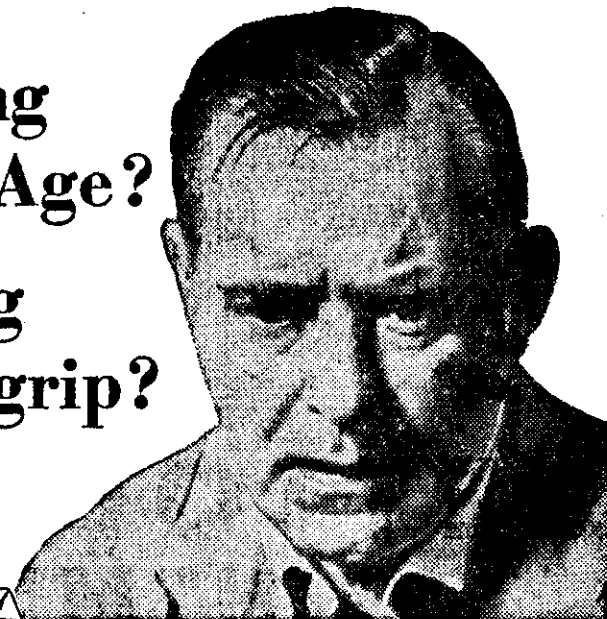
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FELIX MENDELSSOHN'S music led the programme of the first symphony concert played in United States-occupied Germany. The BBC reported at the time that records of both Mendelssohn and Offenbach (blacklisted by the Nazis) had been found at Berchtesgaden.

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