

PEACE, WITH HUNGER

WHEN *The Listener* interviewed Sir Henry French, G.B.E., K.C.B., the other day, we found him not at all anxious to talk about himself, but very anxious to talk instead about food. This was perhaps only natural, for Sir Henry was Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Food in Great Britain during the war years, and his main purpose on his present visit to New Zealand and Australia is to thank both countries for their war-time supplies to Britain.

"I have no desire for personal publicity: I just don't care about it at all. But that is a very important question you have asked me."

Our question, put to Sir Henry, was "What is the answer to the problem of starvation in Europe, taking into account the fact that a country such as New Zealand is naturally anxious to help supply the United Kingdom first, and let other countries come later?"

Sir Henry said: "To answer that, I must explain that a Combined Food Board, the C.F.B., was set up during the war, having headquarters at Washington. Another body, the London Food Council, was formed in London. (I warn you, my answer will be a long one.)

"Their job was to advise all Allied Governments about the subdivision of the world's exportable surplus of food. There is no doubt in my mind that through that machinery the United Kingdom during the war received a reasonable share of the foodstuffs available. That machinery continues to function.

"But Europe did not receive supplies of food from overseas, because of occupation by the Germans. Now, France, Holland, Norway, and Belgium are making demands on the C.F.B.; therefore the quantity of food available for importation into the United Kingdom is less than it was during the war years.

"At the same time it is accepted generally that any other method of allocating the world's food supplies among the many claimants would produce a less satisfactory situation. One advantage of the present scheme is that only a single buyer is appointed to negotiate for purchases from overseas. It is not a case of England coming first, but through her geographical situation, her needs are the greatest. Her requirements are viewed side by side with other nations."

We said we had heard complaints that English people were on a much lower scale of rations than some of the Germans, and asked Sir Henry French if that were so.

"It would be a bad way of starting the new peace if famine followed the defeat of the Germans," he said. "One of the troubles in Europe since VE Day has been transport. One place might be well off for food while there might be starvation in another place only 100 miles away. I think we should take any broad, general statements about Ger-



SIR HENRY FRENCH
Food is a world problem

mans being better off than we are with very great caution."

Food Production is Vital

"Your question as to a solution of the famine problem in Europe brings me once again to my mission here. I want to leave the impression that while we thank you for your wonderful efforts, continued production is of the utmost importance to the whole world. Lucky countries like New Zealand, which have been far away from the scene of fighting, can ease the situation.

"You cannot look at the food problem from the point of view of any one country. It is a world problem. Farmers must go on producing, and people in producing countries must also put some restraint on the amount they eat."

Something About Himself

We asked Sir Henry French something about himself.

"There's really nothing much I can tell you," he said. "But if it is of any interest to your readers—and I leave you to judge that—I joined the British Agricultural Department, London, at the age of 17, as an ordinary clerk. I rose, by promotion, to be second man in the department and was then transferred to take charge of the preparation of food plans in 1936. I was head of the Ministry of Food all through the war years until last September when I resigned."

For 35 years he was in the Ministry of Agriculture. Then, in 1936, the Government set up a small organisation to prepare plans for the distribution of food if war should come. That work took him into a new field. For three years before the war plans were made, and were at an advanced stage by September, 1939. That little department developed into the Ministry of Food.

In the middle of 1945 Sir Henry asked to be allowed to resign, but his Minister (Sir Ben Smith) asked him to visit New Zealand and Australia for the simple purpose of expressing the appreciation of the British Government and people for the substantial supplies of food sent during the war.

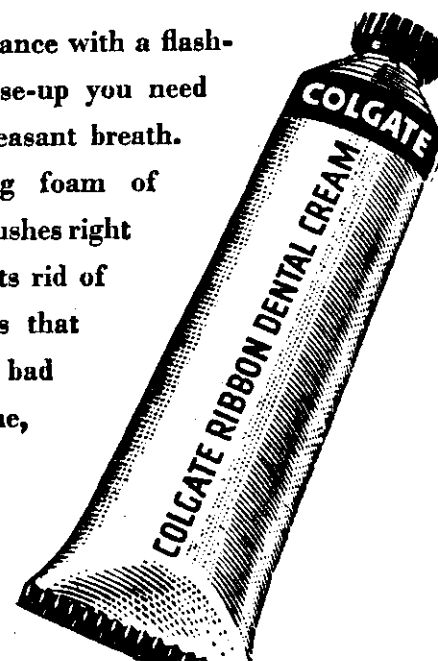
"Mine," he said, "is not a sensational mission. I have just travelled 2,500 miles by car in the North Island—I have not yet visited the South—and I find that people say they don't want thanks; all they wish to do is to continue producing and exporting to the maximum. That, as I see it, is the general attitude; one for which I am very grateful."

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