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Letters From Listeners

THE "DARK" AGES

Sir,—It appears from your issue of March 29 that Mr. Tyndall maintains his view that the Middle Ages was a period of cultural blackout until Europe's happy awakening about the year 1400. I do not wish to discuss his views in detail—practically every sentence in his letter is open to devastating criticism—and I understand that they will not distort the spirited episodes that are being broadcast to schools. Nevertheless I feel that they call for a firm protest.

It is true that there were movements in human affairs conveniently, though not very accurately, called the Renaissance and the Reformation. It is true also that the modern world differs radically from mediaeval times, and that in their exuberance and self-confidence the men of the Renaissance blackguarded the previous age in terms echoed by Mr. Tyndall. But such vilification is not history. All who have studied the matter would agree that the cultural achievements of the Middle Ages form a magnificent heritage, and that they were the foundation on which modern progress—if it be progress—was built.

Mr. Tyndall asks for names and in addition to Dante perhaps he may be satisfied with Giotto and Cimabue, Grosseteste and St. Thomas Aquinas, Chaucer and Alcuin. The fact is, however, that in wide fields of artistic expression the Middle Ages did not seek out and glorify the individual. No one can name the man who designed Gloucester Cathedral, or the stained glass windows of Chartres, or the pageantry of a mediaeval festival. But art is none the less vital because it springs from the life and tradition of a community. Mr. Tyndall should know that in the view of some scholars the Renaissance had a baleful influence over the course of Western art; for it divorced art from the people and handed it over as the preserve of a specialised élite. As for the Church and education: Mr. Tyndall has no business to quote as a general opinion an interpretation which, to say the least, is only one view among several, or to ignore the fact that the Church provided a continuous educational tradition bridging the darkest of the Middle Ages.

In short it is time that we stopped dismissing an epoch with crude and self-confident generalisations. Those who have lived through two world wars and who now contemplate the problems of peace would do well to approach the culture of the Middle Ages with a certain humility and openness of mind.

F. L. W. WOOD (Wellington).

Sir,—In your issue of March 22 I complained that, in a series of broadcasts for schools, children were being told that in the Middle Ages (up to 1400) "there had been a blackout on education, art, science—even thought, and everything making for progress." In your issue of March 29 the author of the broadcasts defends his statement. No one will deny that he has courage. The editor of the *Cambridge Mediaeval History* speaks of the "marvellous" renaissance of the 12th Century; so sober a writer as H.

W. C. Davis, in his little book in the Home University Library, describes the mediaeval period as a "Golden Age"; and a very eminent French historian, Diehl, allows himself to speak of the civilisation of Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages as "equal to that of any age in brilliancy," but for Mr. Tyndall the Mediaeval period is just a blackout! In his great work, *Science and the Modern World*, Professor Whitehead tells us that "the Middle Ages formed one long training of the intellect of Western Europe in the sense of order"; he goes so far as to say that "the faith in the possibility of science, generated antecedently to the development of modern scientific theory, is an unconscious derivative from mediaeval theology; but for Mr. Tyndall the mediaeval period is marked by a blackout in "thought, and everything making for progress." Mr. Tyndall says that it was the same with education generally—just a blackout. Yet I find that Monroe, in his standard *History of Education*, refers to the later Middle Ages as a period where intellectual interests were "numerous and intense"; I find that A. F. Leach, in his book on educational charters, describes the university life of the early 14th Century as "full of life and progress"; and finally Rashdale in his great *History of the Universities of the Middle Ages*, speaks of "vast numbers of keen and active and industrious brains" and of "the enormous intellectual enthusiasm" kindled in the universities in their best period. (Before Mr. Tyndall talks about only 80 students attending a mediaeval university, he would do well to consult Rashdale's chapter on the numbers at Mediaeval universities; and he will learn that it is "pretty certain" that Paris at the time had about 6,000!) As for Art, Mr. Tyndall tells us that he prefers the painters of a later period. About that I wouldn't dream of making any complaint; but, before he writes again about a blackout in mediaeval art, he ought to get hold of a good book containing pictures of the mediaeval cathedrals. Of course there was a dark side to the period, a terribly dark side, as indeed there is to every period, and nobody can complain when attention is drawn to it—even in broadcasts to children; but, when a teacher, speaking over the air to children who are compelled to listen, describes the dark side and nothing else, so serious a perversion of history invites a protest. HAROLD MILLER (Wellington).

Sir,—Mr. Tyndall combines a woeful lack of logic with an amazing ignorance of the Middle Ages. He conveniently ignores Mr. Miller's reference to the Gothic cathedrals and concentrates exclusively on painting as if that were the only art. He seems to think also that there were no great painters before the Renaissance. Has he ever heard of Giotto or Cimabue?

He sneers at the Trivium (which, by the way, included Logic) and the Quadrivium. T. H. Huxley writes: "I doubt