

FROM BBC TO DOMINIONS OFFICE

IT was a surprise to most people to learn that a woman had been appointed assistant secretary in the Office of the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom. Though we have read constantly over the last years of women in important positions, in Parliament, in the British Cabinet, in UNRRA and so on, it is the first time that a woman has been sent out from the Dominions Office to New Zealand. During the few seconds that passed between my tentative knock and entry into Miss Staple's office a picture flashed through my mind of all the indomitable First Women: the first at Cambridge and Oxford, the first woman doctor, the first in Parliament, the first to play football or run in the Olympic Games. Miss Betty Staple has none of that formidable self-assurance that one associates with pioneers.

"I was most surprised that people seemed to make quite a fuss about my appointment," she said, when I explained that *The Listener* was interested in her as a Pioneer Woman. "In London we looked on the New Zealand Department for External Affairs as being well ahead of us, in that you have sent women on the staff to Canberra and London. I thought that you would accept it as

quite natural that a woman might be sent out from London to such a job."

Effects of the War

"But surely it is an innovation for the Dominions Office to send women overseas as part of the administrative staff?"

"Yes, it is. There is another woman, a Miss Emery, who has been sent to Ottawa, and there are something like eight women altogether in administrative positions in the Office. The first appointment of a woman was only in 1940. Sending women overseas is an effect of the war, as inevitably many more women were employed in office jobs and there was a real shortage of men."

"And does this apply to all administrative positions in the British Civil Service?"

"The admission of women into the administrative grade of the Civil Service in England goes back to 1925 when the Civil Service Entrance Examination was thrown open to women. In that year a woman was appointed to the Ministry of Health and another, Miss Mary Smieton, who now has an important position with UNRRA, was appointed to the Ministry of Labour. Besides the stiff competitive entrance examination there is a long and tough interview, designed to test confidence and the ability

to discuss and hold your own with a room full of experts. By 1939 most departments had women in the administrative grade, though the employment of women in those departments where there is an overseas tour—the Foreign Office, the Colonial Office, and the Dominions Office—presents certain difficulties. It has, however, been decided to throw open even the Foreign Office to women—single women. The bar to married women in the Service still remains. A married woman may be asked to remain in her position if a special request is made, but as a general rule women have to retire on marriage."

I asked Miss Staple whether she had harboured any long-term scheme to come to New Zealand when she joined the staff of the Dominions Office.

"No. I felt it was really good luck that I got into the office at all. But I had been working with the BBC Empire Section for three years or so during the early part of the war and I became interested in the Dominions. All through the war the Entrance Examination for the Civil Service was suspended, so I just had the interview to face. I was lucky in that there was a vacancy in the Dominions Office in 1942. And I feel I have been still more lucky in having this chance to come out here. But it was not a question of choice. There was

a vacancy for New Zealand and I am very happy to be here for two years."

"Do you think that the war has made a permanent difference to the status and employment of women in Britain?"

"Yes, I think so. As a result of the war many women are equipped in technical skills for jobs which previously one thought they could never do. Moreover women have enjoyed doing jobs. Married women who previously were tied to their homes find now that with skill in reorganising their households they can get away, at any rate to part-time jobs. They have learnt to feel themselves much more part of a community, and this has given them wider experience and interests."

"Do you think there is scope for the employment of married women in part-time jobs even in peacetime?"

"Part-time work was looked on as a chance by employers when it was first proposed. It does require co-operation on both sides. But it was done successfully during the war."

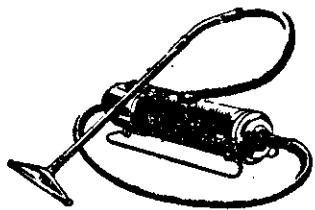
"Well, Miss Staple, to turn to another question in which we understand you are interested. We have been told that one effect of the war has been to bring classical music closer to the man in the street. Is it true that there is something of a revival of music in England?"

"That is something which is rather hard to assess, but I would say that music in the best sense has advanced phenomenally. War concerts were

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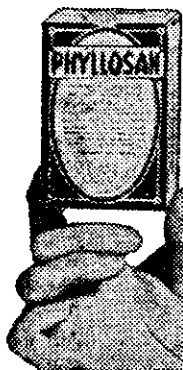
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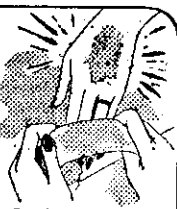
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