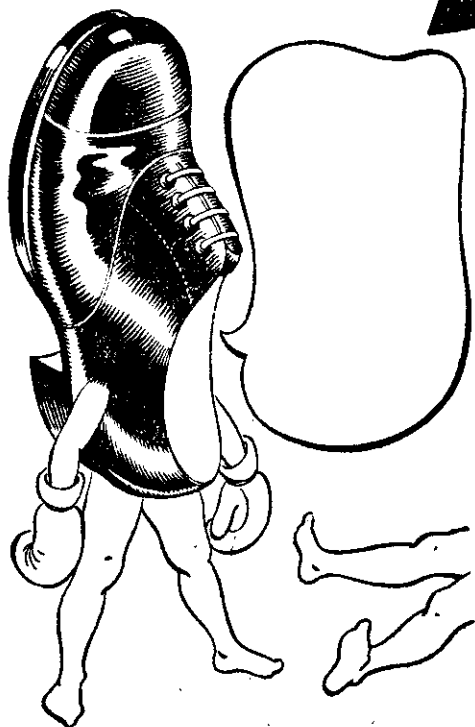


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LETTERS

Rewards of Authorship

Sir,—Your readers may be interested in some comments from a 35-page questionnaire called "The Cost of Letters" in the September number of *Horizon*. Contemporary writers were asked such questions as: How much does a writer need, and can he earn this sum by writing? If not, what is his most suitable second occupation? Will his work suffer, or be enriched by this diversion? Should the State do more for writers?

Cyril Connolly (editor of *Horizon*) says:

... upwards of five pounds a day net. He can only earn it if he writes something which is bought by Hollywood and/or chosen by one of the American book societies. ... A good book is the end-product of an obsession; any diversion which impedes the growth and final exorcism of this obsession is harmful. ... The State, in so far as it supplants private enterprise, must supplant private patronage. The State's attitude towards the artist should be to provide *luxu, calme, et volupte*, and when it receives *ordre et beauté* in return, to be sure to recognise it.

John Betjeman says:

No person requiring drinks, cigarettes, cinemas and theatres and food above British restaurant standard can afford to live by writing prose. ... Not even a popular poet, if there is one, can live by his poetry. ... I do not see why writers, as much as school-teachers or manual workers, should not be entitled to a State pension when their powers are over. ... I would take up some handicraft. ... to fall back on and to content the manual side of me without destroying my soul. ...

Elizabeth Bowen says that a writer whose name is still of value should be able to command about £2,000 a year net by the time he is 60:

a writer's writing would be improved by any activity that brought him into company with other than that of his fellow writers. Literary sequestration. ... is most unfortunate.

Alex Comfort says:

Artists are not privileged people—art is probably the human activity most deeply dependent on a responsible attitude to other people.

Robert Graves says:

A poet requires whatever it needs to be completely his own master. ... W. H. Davies solved the problem by being a professional tramp. ... Those who pay the piper call the tune. The State is a dangerous patron of literature.

George Orwell says:

The best income for a writer at present values, is about £1000 a year. He cannot earn it by writing (only a few hundred people in Great Britain earn their living solely by writing books). ... The only thing the State can usefully do is to divert more of the public money into buying books for the public libraries. ...

V. S. Pritchett says:

J. Middleton Murry held that a writer could honestly earn about £400 a year. Aldous Huxley estimated the need at about £700. The post-war equivalent would be £1,200 to £1,400 gross. The promising, the rising, the merely successful, cannot earn anything like that. ... After 30, the outside job is inevitable, in our highly taxed society, where private income is vanishing—inevitable, and in the long run, fatal. ...

With a mere glimpse at the subject I exceed your space ration. The whole questionnaire shows that writers do not wish to live more simply than others; that the rewards of authorship have not increased to cover the added expense of living; that writers are, therefore, forced into secondary occupations which tend to become primary; that with the decline of private incomes, the State must do more to help writers, preferably by indirect subsidy. Only much persuasion from the writers themselves can bring this about. Many of them disapprove of the State, and show no inclination to influence it. This discussion

aims to diagnose "the disease of our culture which we christened 'inflationary decadence.'" A.K.S. (Marton).

Sir,—Your correspondent Dennis McEldowney raises some interesting points in his letter, but it seems to us that some of the premisses are false. The average sale of an English book is surely more than 1,000 copies; certainly it has greatly exceeded this during the war years. But whether this is true or not, to say of New Zealand books that the sale is 200 copies on the average is absurd. We assume that Mr. McEldowney is referring to books issued by publishers and not privately at the author's expense. If the average sale of a book were only 200 copies, how many publishers could exist in this country, and for how long? Let us admit at once that the rewards of authorship (and of bookselling and publishing) are limited. But if a New Zealand author has a book published under the 10 per cent. royalty basis, and is unfortunate to have only 200 copies sold, he will receive some remuneration, even if his publisher sustains a substantial loss (as he surely will). Further, can Mr. McEldowney substantiate his statement that a New Zealand author will receive less per thousand sales for a book published in New Zealand than for one published in England? As a matter of fact, he will receive considerably more. Higher costs of production usually mean that a book is sold in this country at approximately the same price as the English book when imported to New Zealand. Seeing that royalty is a percentage of the published price, there will be a higher amount in New Zealand than in England. On his English book the New Zealand author receives 10 per cent. of the English published price (and usually only 5 per cent. on Colonial sales), which may be added to by the prevailing rate of exchange, but this benefit is more than offset by English Income Tax, amounting, we believe, to 10/- in the £, which is deducted before it is remitted to New Zealand.

Mr. McEldowney makes a proposal with reference to the recently established State Literary Fund, which, if put into effect, would surely please the select few whose books were chosen for publication, but which would have no effect upon the "rewards of authorship" of the average writer. The establishment of this fund is a step forward in the cultural progress of New Zealand, and we shall look forward to a statement on the nature of its operation.

The New Zealand writer has open to him the columns of his own newspapers, periodicals, and books. The market may be limited, but it is there. And there is nothing to prevent him from exploring the infinitely larger markets in England, America, and Australia. The post will carry his MS as readily from Christchurch to New York as to a publishing house in his own city. But authors must remember that writing, because it can be done so easily, can be done so badly, and that hard work, and the studying of markets as painstakingly as a business man studies his retail markets, is a necessary ingredient to successful writing, if it is to be measured in terms of pounds, shillings and pence.—A. H. AND A. W. REED (Wellington).



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