

CULTURAL DEMOCRACY—

Priestley Condemns it, and Starts an Argument

WRITERS

THE situation outlined by Mr. Priestley is a difficult and complicated one; it raises questions of enormous importance about modern social organisation, its value, values, etc. I don't think there is any doubt that the situation is very serious, but I do think that Mr. Priestley's comments may be somewhat over-simplified—though this has at any rate enabled him to put the matter quite bluntly. He is talking about England of course, but it is quite easy to appreciate most of his points at this distance. Many of us have had the dismaying experience, repeated for far too many years now, of trying unsuccessfully to buy some volume in, say, Everyman's Library — and if things are as bad as Mr. Priestley says, what irony in that title! This kind of experience is, I think, an example of how the situation in England may affect us in New Zealand.



Alan Blakey photo

But what is the situation in New Zealand? Well, speaking very broadly, I should say that it is a great deal worse. Nor is it a situation that is at all new to us—it has always been with us. It is, moreover, the situation that you might reasonably expect to have developed over the 100 years that the European has been established here. Whether it is getting better or worse at the moment, I hardly like to say. From my personal experience as a writer I should say it is tending to improve, even if only very slightly. It is true, that if you occupy yourself with writing as a whole-time job, you may quite well find yourself literally surrounded by people whose only measure of your ability is the amount of money you may make—or fail to make. But that is by no means the whole story—one encounters so many pleasant and encouraging surprises.

I am afraid that I haven't any worthwhile suggestions. It has for a long time seemed to me that one of the toughest problems to be solved is how to convince physically active people that it is not necessarily virtuous to be mentally and emotionally lazy.

—Frank Sargeson

IN principle Mr. Priestley is quite right.

This has been described as the era of the common man, which means that his voice is being heard and his interests considered as never before. But in culture as well as politics, the common man should be led by the uncommon man. The artist (in which term I include the writer), the critic, and the trained appreciator of the arts, are the uncommon men. They are not necessarily better men than the common man; they may be worse. "There is no more merit," says Somerset Maugham, "in having read a thousand books than in having ploughed a thousand fields." But the uncommon man in these categories has

A DISTINCTION was drawn recently by J. B. Priestley between what he called "political democracy" and "cultural democracy." What he said seemed to us so important that we have asked for opinions about it from a selected body of people directly concerned—artists, writers, publishers, educators, musicians, and so on. This issue we print some of their replies, and over the next week or so we shall be publishing others.

We have no space here to quote in full what Priestley said, but have taken out a few salient passages, as follow:

"THERE are two democracies, and I admire the one and detest the other. The first is political democracy, which is based on the belief that all the citizens have a right to decide what kind of government they will have.

"But there is another kind of democracy, which is gaining ground in many parts of the world now, that I detest. This might be called cultural democracy. It professes to believe that the ordinary man or woman is the best judge of everything. It recognises quantity but not quality. It is ready to count heads on every possible issue. It would put anything and everything to a rough and ready vote: ignorance and knowledge are all the same to it.

"Now I believe that if the world is given plenty of time, it will discover the best. Thus, Shakespeare is acknowledged everywhere as a master dramatist. Wherever European music is understood, Bach, Mozart and Beethoven are truly appreciated for their magnificent genius. But this takes time. There has to be first, a good deal of enthusiastic propaganda on behalf of such genius by persons of taste and special knowledge....

"Shoddy commercialism is of course greatly in favour of cultural democracy if only because one man's shilling is as good as another's. The average run of Hollywood films strongly advocate cultural democracy. In these films it is far more important to write a successful

special gifts of expression or appreciation—special equipment. The doctor, the engineer, the architect, the man who services your car or your plumbing, also have special equipment. What we may call the sciences deal with facts, and the arts with opinion, with taste. Men are more ready to defer to experts in facts than to experts in taste. They are loth to admit that their own taste may be deficient. They don't realise that taste, like everything else, has to be cultivated. This is one reason why we have bad pictures in galleries and bad memorials. Nor do they understand that skill in the arts comes from hard work, often agony and sweat.



Spencer Digby photo

"Always scribble, scribble, scribble! Eh, Mr. Gibbon?" said a royal person to the author of the *Decline and Fall*.

So if culture is to be healthy in a democracy, there must be an aristocracy of taste, which sets

dance tune than to compose a symphony, and anybody who does not want either to perform or sit about in night clubs is a prude or an eccentric....

"When Reith was in charge of the BBC he used to announce that he proposed to give the listening public what he thought was good for them to hear, and for my part I admired him for taking this stand.

"There is a great danger in playing down to a half-witted level. Whole masses of people may be confirmed and rooted in their mental laziness and bad taste. Both films and radio, two admirable new techniques, have done far more harm and far less good than they might have achieved, just because they have been 'democratic' in the wrong way....

"The farm-hand down the road has a vote that is equal to my vote. That is as it should be. But just as he knows far more about hedging and ditching and shooting rabbits than I do, so I know far more about books and plays and music than he does, if only because I have given these things my serious attention for the last 35 years. (And he himself would not dispute this). It is not democracy, but just lunacy, if he and his kind are to be encouraged to dictate to me in the cultural spheres in which they do not even pretend to know anything. And the danger is, that if only the lowest levels of taste and intelligence are allowed to survive, then succeeding generations may find themselves exiled from whole worlds of wonder and delight."

standards, just as the University does in scholarship. There are, however, certain difficulties to be faced. Dictation has grave dangers. Will peoples who have resisted it at so much cost in politics, submit to it in culture? Mr. Priestley cites the determination of Lord Reith, but the head of the BBC had an assured finance and no local competition to meet. Editors are differently situated. They feel the tug of opposing forces—the compulsion to give the public what it wants or go out of business, and the desire to give the public what they think it should have. There must be compromise. Editors with ideas and courage assign to serious subjects more than their relative selling value. Mr. Priestley refers to "trash," but what is trash or near-trash? It is something which even the man of taste may like sometimes. And he may object strongly if he doesn't get it. Besides, what is considered trashy or ephemeral to-day, may be placed on a pedestal to-morrow, and yesterday's idols may be cast down. Martin Tupper's sales exceeded those of his contemporary, Tennyson, but he has long been just a comic museum piece. *Three Men in a*

Boat and *The Diary of a Nobody* have become minor classics. I have just read that in the first 20 years of his writing, Mark Twain "was considered something as slow and unimportant as a comic strip."

If the world is given plenty of time, says Mr. Priestley, it will discover the best. Yes, but that means proceeding by trial and error, and necessarily there will be a good deal of error. Society must have freedom to sample and judge. There is a type of intellectual who would give the public only what lies within the narrow range of his likes. Devoted to "schools," and intolerant of what lies outside, he may damn culture among common men instead of blessing it.

It is a garden of freedom that we cultivate. Let us do it with sweet reasonableness.

—Alan Mulgan

IF Priestley's argument is applied to letters it leads to dangerous conclusions. He speaks of trash published during the past six years while good books remained out of print. The Government, he says, "could not make a qualitative judgment." But what is the difference, in those circumstances, between a "qualitative judgment" and a censorship? If it is wrong in principle for the masses to dictate to the experts, on questions which are entirely subjective, it is also wrong for the experts to dictate to the masses. Guidance must come from the higher levels of taste;



but when it becomes self-conscious, with the State in the background, it develops into supervision; and control usually passes into the wrong hands. Although experts know more of their subjects than farm-hands, they are divided among themselves, and indulge vigorously — sometimes ferociously — in the assertion of opinion which apparently Priestley would deny to ordinary or unintelligent people. Critics are by no means infallible; they have damned many good books in the past, and they would do it more frequently in the future if we had autocracy in the arts. Aesthetic taste is not necessarily associated in the same mind with moral judgment and practical wisdom.

Bad work does not matter if at the same time good work can be published. It may be true, as Priestley would point out, that all good books cannot be printed while there are technical limitations; but this is true also of bad writing: a hungry market could absorb much more trash than is at present available. I think we should remember, too, that although many people read nothing but rubbish all their lives there is a constant movement from lower to higher levels of taste. I was an avid reader of comics and schoolboy weeklies in childhood, and

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