

## WHAT PRIESTLEY SAID . . . .

"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 advocates cultural democracy. In these films it is far more important to write a successful 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."

able to keep going for seven years. Another devoted to the arts lasted 17 years. Neither could have lasted as long as it did but for the help of one or two public-spirited enthusiasts."

This may or may not be evidence of the cultural democracy which Mr. Priestley deplors: it might have been due to bad management or bad editorial work, but both publications were an honest attempt to do something for the arts, and good writers and editors gave of their best."

While there are no regrets over these two experiments on the writer's part, they were at least a valuable experience. Could they not be fairly called evidence of the existence in this country of Mr. Priestley's "Cultural" democracy which he so much deplors?

—H. H. Tombs

MR. PRIESTLEY is, of course, largely right. In films in particular, the tastes of the discerning few have had pretty scant consideration. In radio, too, the voice of the multitude has drowned other and more worthy voices—though not always and everywhere. But Mr. Priestley is less than just to publishers in suggesting that the bad taste of the great mass of the people has recently been the main factor in what books will be published.

In Britain in war time most of the older publishers seem to have used their

paper quotas to assure a livelihood to their authors. The best-selling novelists have had their editions rigorously limited, the authors of middling sales at any rate had their books published regularly. And for this purpose the "high-

brow writer," and the writer of love stories and thrillers, seem to have been grouped together by the publisher in his paternal fashion as he tried to keep his family together till the brave days after the war. It was an understandable attitude, and if it showed little understanding of the duty of a publisher to "litera-



ture," it showed little either of an attempt to exploit the worse at the expense of the better.

It is true indeed that in pre-war times the great prize in publishing has been the best-seller. And it is true, too, that the reading habits of our society tend to make all readers cluster round the best-selling novel which everyone talks about. Those tendencies are reinforced overseas, especially in America, by lavish advertising. But that that advertising only encourages existing tendencies, is proved by the remarkable way in which best-sellers in the older countries become best-sellers here too—although never advertised and rarely reviewed. Here, also, local production of the works of a few popular novelists (started during the war by local representatives of British publishers) has further canalised public taste by making their books widely distributed and easily available.

But it is foolish, and indeed canting, to blame commerce for the concentration of popular taste round much worthless fiction, badly written and with little relation to experience. The effect of the reign of the best-seller can be mitigated by encouraging bookshops and libraries to present a good range of books of all ages and on all subjects to the public. And in the New Zealand library and bookshop it has been possible to find such a range of books even in the most restricted days of the war. In fact, in spite of Mr. Priestley, my own experience during the war is that the classic English novels were easier to obtain than, say, the works of Leslie Charteris. And it was not infrequent during the war years to find that the only novels with which my bookshop was overstocked were the most ably and intelligently written. Probably the best of the fiction republished in New Zealand by any critical standards—*Indigo*, by Christine Weston, and *The Ballad and the Source*, by Rosamund Lehmann—have both been slow in selling, and copies of the latter are still being put out at annual sales. You can't make the bulk of the people read better books merely by making them plentiful.

On the local publishing side something can be done by a State subsidy to make possible the publication of good New

(continued on next page)



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