

LISTENER

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Art in Our Lives

AN interesting contribution to the cultural democracy discussion that has just come to an end in our columns is the appearance in the shop-windows this week of a book called *Design and Living*.^{*} The author, who had a European reputation as an architect before he came to New Zealand, and still has it, says simply that "we can live better with design than without it." Design is not affectation or artiness but harmony, something that works well and looks well, looks well because it works well, uses the most suitable materials, and belongs to its time and place. Because it is something as simple as that, and yet as fundamental, it is within the reach of ordinary people; or comes within their reach as soon as they realise what it is. So the book is an attempt to show what design is, to say in words, and to illustrate in drawings, what goes into the planning of a good chair, or a good house, or a good town. It is all so simple, and expressed so reasonably, that no one who is interested in the subject at all will have trouble in understanding the argument or difficulty in accepting it. The author is not superior or uppish or contemptuous. He is not even impatient. Bad taste, he seems to be saying, is often only ignorance of good taste, lack of knowledge of a few simple principles and of acquaintance with a few simple designs. If we can't all immediately distinguish the good from the bad, the good will hold its own against the bad if it gets a chance to compete on even terms. That, in any case, seems to be the author's faith, and a faith expressed so reasonably ought to spread.

^{*}*Design and Living*. By E. A. Plishke. Printed and distributed by Whitcombe and Tombs for the Department of Internal Affairs.

LETTERS FROM LISTENERS

PRIESTLEY AND CULTURE.

Sir,—If I was a farmhand down the road from Priestley and he offered me culture on a silver platter and I felt a call to criticise the gift and, strong in the spirit of a great farmhand called Robert Burns, went right ahead and delivered judgment, and he called me a half-wit, a cultural ignoramus, nothing but a mentally lazy ditchdigger and rabbit shooter, on the lowest level of taste, trying to exile my children from whole worlds of wonder and delight, I would call him a blackmailing tyrant.

*How pamper'd Luxury, Flattery by her side,
The parasite empoisoning her ear
With all the servile wretches in the rear
Looks o'er proud property, extended wide;
And eyes the simple rustic hind,
Whose toil upholds the glittering show,
A creature of another kind,
Some coarser substance unrefined,
Placed for her lordly use thus far, thus vile below.*

FARMHAND (Thames).

Sir,—Is there, after all, any real distinction to be made between a political democracy and a cultural one? Mr. Priestley sees in the latter a danger that is actually inherent in both, for it is democracy itself that is open to corruption.

I believe it was Aristotle who first pointed out that a democracy may degenerate into an ochlocracy: a government in which the most enlightened section of society, inevitably a minority, is overwhelmed and crucified by the more ignorant majority. Such government—of the majority, by the majority, for the majority—can become a travesty of true democracy. In normal times, provided that the majority is a tolerant and public-spirited one, the minority may fare well enough; but there is no guarantee that such conditions will always prevail. In matters of everyday politics no less than in matters affecting our cultural life, it is undesirable that the few should be completely dominated by the many. Equally obnoxious, of course, would be the domination of the many by the few—though it is not difficult to conceive of circumstances in which it would be the preferred alternative.

Mr. Priestley's fears will find a sympathetic response among all thoughtful people. It is as well, however, to understand their true origin; the fact that democracy, as we now know it, is undemocratic. It has been said that democracy can be made to work in no other way, that it necessarily involves the sacrifice of minorities for the good of the whole. But when these minorities may represent up to 40% of the community, the word "democracy" is surely a misnomer. DEMOS (Lower Hutt).

Sir,—May I congratulate Mr. McCormick on his contribution to "Culture and Democracy." He is the only one among your commentators who sees the implications and the irony of the fact that Priestley of all people is weary of "cultural democracy" which to create he has devoted his life to. Recently he appeared as a fervent advocate of UNESCO whose chief aim it is to spread "cultural democracy." This new attitude of Priestley's therefore smacks of intellectual dishonesty, for he bites the ("farm-") hand who feeds him. As someone else has already pointed out, he does not make it clear why the "common man" should be more able to judge political issues than literary ones. None of your contributors has answered the question whether he can do either.

Mr. McCormick quotes the Elizabethans as shining examples of good

taste, because they appreciated Shakespeare. I have always had some suspicions in this regard: after all the Elizabethans liked bear-baiting and cock-fights just as much as Shakespeare's plays, which probably appealed to them because of the "thrills" and not because of their intrinsic dramatic and poetical qualities: they were fond of the "show-man" Shakespeare, not of the genius.

We certainly can observe a deterioration of taste, but in doing so we must consider its main element: the shifting of the accent from quality to quantity. Light and cheap fiction and poetry have always existed as an undercurrent beneath great literature, but—and this is the crucial point—only now this undercurrent threatens to become the main stream and to force the vital powers which nourish our spiritual life to go underground. This is the great danger which a stout intellectual resistance movement should fight, otherwise mass-produced literature will overwhelm the qualitative output of the few. Mr. Priestley is quite right on this point, but it would have been far more convincing if this timely warning had come from anyone else.

G. E. EICHBAUM (Wellington).

Sir,—I read with alarm the extract from Mr. Priestley's article and the various comments by New Zealand people. Surely Mr. Priestley does not claim that his 35 years study of books and plays qualifies him to thrust upon

The King's Birthday Broadcasting Hours

On Monday, June 2 (the occasion of the celebration of the King's Birthday) will be from 6.0 a.m. until 10.30 p.m.

the world in general and the reading public in particular, only that which he thinks they should have. Would he have us read only what he thinks is good for us? I feel that such an attitude savours rather of what we have just spent six years trying to conquer. As for his comparison of himself with a farmer, Samuel Butler was a farmer, and without this experience *Erewhon* would never have been written.

Shakespeare was popular with the public and while the cultural dictators say he should be made a "compulsory subject," the fact that it is made compulsory (either by education or suppressing other authors who cater for the public demand), is one very good reason for not being interested. Schubert's music was written out of economic necessity, accepted by his public and also, years later, remembered and enjoyed by us. Who can say that we are on the wrong cultural track when such composers as Chopin and Gershwin, such playwrights as Shakespeare and Rattigan draw the same representative admirers?

I, for one, will not be party to being dished out just what Mr. Priestley thinks I should have. The volumes of Shakespeare, Thorne Smith, Priestley, Samuel Johnson and others, I shall read just so long as they satisfy my desires. I have even read Miss Marsh's *Death in Ecstasy* and it filled in an evening.

but would she include it in her diet of what she calls "hard tack?" In a world of restrictions, please let us choose for ourselves what we wish to read. FREEDOM (Fendalton).

THE ROCKING HORSE

Sir,—When writing critically as I did about the BBC production "The Rocking Horse" I did not know that it was a dramatization of one of D. H. Lawrence's short stories. The knowledge has not made me change my opinion that the whole thing was just "silly." It was the theme and not the presentation that I criticised. To ask people to take seriously or to derive any entertainment from a play whose theme was Divine revelation to a child of six years old enabling him over a period of years to back the winner in the Derby and other races and thereby provide a small fortune for an extravagant mother to squander—well—I sincerely hope there are still many people who, with me, think that "silly" and "crass nonsense" are the only epithets that apply.

H. THOMPSON (Christchurch).

WOMEN'S INSTITUTES

Sir,—In your issue of December 13, 1946, I said that contrary to general belief Women's Institutes existed in New Zealand during the last decade of the last century. With commendable zeal Barbara Harper has searched the newspaper files in the Christchurch Public Library and maintains (in your issue of April 3) her original statement that these institutes were first established in New Zealand in 1921. I can recall, however, that the early movement failed to secure the respect of the majority of the men or the serious attention of the press.

Just recently I caused inquiries to be made from one whom I knew to have been intimately associated with this early movement, and here in substance is what she says: "The *Malvern* (Springfield, Sheffield, Russell's Flat—all in Canterbury) *Women's Institute* was founded about 1894 or 1895 and was a branch of the *Canterbury Women's Institute* founded about 1892. They held no exhibitions of flowers or cookery, and though interested as individuals in literature did not attempt talks, plays, or readings. But having been just granted the franchise they discussed social and political matters, and some very important early legislation for the protection of women and girls was due to their cogent and persistent representation."

Strange indeed in 1921 to go to England for a name intimately known to many in New Zealand apparently at least two decades before its use in England! When anniversaries are celebrated let due credit be given the bold pioneers of the financially straitened 'nineties.

J.W.C. (Auckland).

SATURDAY AFTERNOON PROGRAMMES

Sir,—I entirely agree with Enid M. Smith with regard to Saturday afternoon programmes. It is time something was done to improve the standard of music broadcast on that afternoon. If programme organisers consider it is necessary to give a classical programme every other afternoon in the week (as indeed it is) why not on Saturdays too? Do they believe all lovers of good music go out on Saturday afternoons?

M.I.W. (Wellington).