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DEALERS THROUGHOUT THE DOMINION

SPEECH HABITS AND SOCIAL ATTITUDES

This article for "The Listener" by NGAIO MARSH came to us after the first of A. R. D. Fairburn's articles on Spoken English had appeared. We thought it best, however, to let that series end before publishing this contribution.

MR. FAIRBURN is going in with a grand lack of the usual self-defensive irritability which will no doubt characterise the spate of letters that (one hopes) his article may provoke.

His first four paragraphs could scarcely be better as a preparation for his thesis. He whets the appetite and seems to promise that his argument is to be founded on the difficult but correct basis of aural discrimination.

In any discussion of speech-habits there are bound to be differences of opinion. I should like to have at Mr. Fairburn in the matter of his analysis of English speech-habits. Before doing so, however, I suppose I should say that my only authority for joining issue rests on the fact that for over five years I lived in Southern England among people who belonged to one of the groups Mr. Fairburn instances. Having a passionate interest in speech-habit, I listened to them with considerable attention. And further, since the question of class arises, I suppose I must make myself hot under the collar by defining the social group to which I shall refer. The group, then, of whom I shall speak, was a large one deriving, for the most part, from the army, the diplomatic service, the world of science and the peerage. These people's immediate and very wide circle was of their own kind; most of them had been educated at English preparatory and Public schools, and in some cases, at English or Continental Universities. Several of the men were regular soldiers or sailors. Others worked at city jobs, still others were what used to be called landed gentry. I suppose that in spite of generous dollops of Irish and Scottish blood all of them would fall into Mr. Fairburn's "Southern Englishmen in general" class. It is perhaps necessary to add that, within this group, political opinions ranged from deep blue to scarlet, but that there were no leftists, however extreme, who felt any urge to change their normal and, I maintain, natural habit of speech.

"Oxford Bleat, etc."

Of 50 people in this circle, chosen at random, with whom I was acquainted for five years, none substituted the letter W for the letter R. I can remember meeting only one "Southern Englishman" who did so. He, I think, was actually unable to form the sound: a disability, by the way, that is often associated with a stammer. This W for R habit was no doubt affected in late Victorian and Edwardian times by a small section of this particular class. In my experience it is not a modern affectation. I found, moreover, that the "Oxford

bleat" was a phenomenon of musical comedy and vaudeville stages, rather than of the University itself; though there are Oxford men who profess to recognise the Balliol lisp.

The "heah" and "theah" habit did crop up quite often in army, but hardly ever in naval, families. I found that Harrovians spoke with fewer eccentricities than men from some of the smaller Public Schools, that Etonians have a trick of making an apologetic grimace accompanied by a characteristic tone when they utter certain words. Lift girls, hairdressers and shop assistants spoke with a mixture of Mr. Fairburn's Colonial genteel and his Southern England, and added to both an indefinable mince. I found an astonishing variety in speech among people who were of the same social group, and I formed the opinion that within the wide divisions of class there were strongly marked and highly characteristic subdivisions traceable to schools, professions and family idiosyncrasies. It would, I believe, be the opinion of all persons in the group of which I write that the best and clearest speech-habit is that used by certain English actors, notably those trained by the late Elsie Fogetty.

In short, there is, as Mr. Fairburn suggests, a much richer and infinitely more diverse field of speech-habit in England than in this country.

More Care Taken

It was clear that the Southern English of this sort are infinitely more concerned with speech-habit than their opposite numbers in New Zealand. Nor is their concern entirely a matter of class. I have heard "heah" and "theah" laughed at just as heartily in this group as in New Zealand; while genteelisms of all sorts were an anathema. These people did not speak as they did to distinguish themselves from the lower orders. Insufferably no doubt, if they had thought about this at all, they would have considered the distinction sufficiently established. Their speech was a part of their environment and training, and was, I maintain, almost entirely unconscious.

Mr. Fairburn's well observed "colonial genteel" with its "haome," and "nao" and "fust" are, by the way, pure cockney, though their New Zealand adopters might not care to think so. Mr. Fairburn's preliminary analysis on New Zealand speech seems to me to be fair enough, but will he not agree that "foine" for fine is being replaced by "fahn." The New Zealand tennis player more often ejaculates "eout-sahd" than "eout-soide." And isn't "Chews-dayee" nearer the mark than "Chews-dee?"

The Final Test

One more question and I have done. Will Mr. Fairburn agree that the final test of a speech-habit as a pleasing or a distressing sound is to hear it away from its environment, if it is indigenous to your own country, and in its own environment, if it is not? After five years' absence from New Zealand I became tuned-out to New Zealand speech. On the desultory occasions when I encountered it, both in England and on the Continent, it affected me as a visiting Englishman's speech so often affects New Zealanders. It seemed emasculate and mannered. The long drawn out

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