

## BOOKS

# Education — for What?

READING, FILM AND RADIO TASTES OF HIGH SCHOOL BOYS AND GIRLS. By W. J. Scott. New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

(Reviewed by A. R. D. Fairburn)

THIS is the record of a survey made in 19 high schools, among nearly 4,000 pupils. The object was "to discover the out-of-school cultural interests of the post-primary school boys and girls of New Zealand." It was felt by the Council for Educational Research that "a knowledge of the books, magazines, newspapers, films, and radio items that they voluntarily choose to fill their leisure hours is indispensable if the task of teaching English, and particularly English literature, is to be well done." Mr. Scott has done his job very well indeed. He has sifted the replies to questionnaires thoroughly, and has made many interesting deductions. No teacher of English will fail to read this book if he takes his work seriously.

It will be a pity, however, if the book is read only by English teachers. For here, without doubt, is a social document of the highest importance, which deserves most careful study by the politician, the parent, the churchman and the sociologist. Mr. Scott writes with proper restraint, and takes a level view of things; but in the course of his 200 pages he manages to map out most of the bogs, ditches, cliffs and desert patches in our cultural life. I hope no prospective reader of the book will be misled into thinking, from its title, that this is just another dull educational report, of interest only to specialists. Although the study deals with children, it might well be read as a report on the general condition of culture in New Zealand. The writing is incisive, with touches of pleasantly subtle irony. No foul blows are given, and no punches are pulled.

Mr. Scott insists, rightly, on the need for maintaining standards of judgment if we are not to drift further into chaos. He understands fully what is implied in this. Some will accuse him of being puritanical when he condemns shockers. I must confess that I have not yet sorted out this question to my own satisfaction. It seems to me to be better to allow children to read Sexton Blake, on the understanding that it is not literature, than to give them such a flabby piece of writing as, say, Longfellow's *Hiwatha* and let them think it represents a high level of achievement. The reading of shockers by adults is a means of escape from suburban boredom, and I think it can be profitably discussed only in that context. If we insist on making a chromium-plated desert of our community life, we must have drugs to relieve the mental strain. The remedy lies in the field of religion and sociology rather than in that of literature. There is, I think, a tendency for the life of the ordinary man and woman to become more and more meaningless as our secular culture extends its barren dominion, and as organic principles and notions of value give place to "scientific" measurement of all things. In such circumstances the reader, the film fan and the radio listener look increasingly, not for meaning (which evaporates), but for sensation.

I think that this attitude, which is evidence of cultural recidivism in



W. J. SCOTT  
*Bogs, ditches, cliffs, deserts*

adults, may be more or less natural in young children—and perhaps still, to some extent, in high school children. The *B.O.F.* stories and the *Union Jack Library* paper-backs of my youth were, as I recall them, merely stimulants to my imagination. But I can't help thinking, with Mr. Scott, that standards have deteriorated even in this field. I have seen "comics" and films that are so full of the crudest sadism that it is difficult to imagine the state of mind of those who produce them and those who enjoy them.

The most important thing is, not that we should avoid the bad, but that we should maintain distinctions between good and bad, between the fruitful and the destructive. If an adult reads a shocker, the thing of greatest moment is that he shall not confuse it with literature, even if the detective has been to Oxford. It is the second-best, not the worst, that is the deadly enemy of the best. One of our difficulties is that things that are barren and unfruitful can disguise themselves very easily.

"To most people," says Mr. Scott, "a highbrow is either a person with queer abnormal tastes, or a humbug..." I fear that some of the highbrows themselves are just as much to blame for this state of affairs as are the ignorant and the half-educated. The preciousness and perversity, and the downright inanition, of a great deal of fashionable highbrow writing during the past 30 years or so has encouraged many people who are not Philistines to ask whether any good thing can come out of Bloomsbury. In a period when Philistinism is general it is unfortunate that a more robust spirit has not been evident in English letters. (When I say that of course, I shall be suspected of praising the poems of Sir Henry Newbolt and Priestley's *Good Companions*. I mean, rather, that Virginia Woolf was incapable of writing anything with as much spirit as the Brontës' novels; that Huxley, however entertaining he may be, is a poor substitution for Fielding or even Hardy; and that poetry during the period in question has been dominated by epicene young gentlemen of great talent.)

HAVING read everything that Mr. Scott says about shockers and bloods, I cannot agree that he is really puritanical. He makes many distinctions,

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