

A GENERAL MEETS THE PRESS

Our Army in Japan

THE General was to meet Pressmen at three o'clock. A few minutes to the hour there were a dozen or so of us there, in a "War Office room" as bare as an institutional interior could be. No sovereign, no victorious general looked down from the walls. Wellington did not wave his line forward, or greet Blucher in a huddle of dead and dying carefully arranged by the artist's imagination. There was a long table for the interviewers and a cross table for the General and his staff. Clearly this was a room for hard thinking untrammelled by distractions.

As one waited one could reflect on the relations between General and Press. In ancient Rome, for example, they had no newspapers, but official news was posted up—"Acta Diurna"—and there were newsletters, as there were in England in Tudor and Stuart times, written by men in the capital for the information of folk in the country. Cicero writes complaining that there is too much politics in his newsletter from Rome, and not enough gossip—and Cicero ranks as a high-brow.

What a Roman Might Have Said

But did generals from outlying provinces meet writers of these newsletters and give them the low-down on what was going on? May we imagine a commander from Britain talking to a group in the earlier days of the occupation? "Things are going pretty well, gentlemen. We are subduing the country and bringing it under our rule. The Britons will be better off under us than under their rival chiefs, who were always scrapping. But it's a tough job. Some of our posts are isolated, and they are liable to be attacked at any time by greatly superior numbers. And make no mistake about it, these chaps can fight. Do the troops like the country? I wouldn't say too much about it, but they don't care for it much. There's a lot of forest, and the winters are wet and cold, and they miss the fun of garrison towns. But of course they do their job. The Britons are pretty barbarous, but they've got their culture. I brought back some interesting metal work—some of it's in gold. Here's a brooch. . . . And then, the oysters. They're about the best thing in Britain."

And long afterwards, another interview. "Off the record, gentlemen, things aren't going too well. We're pulling out; that's about the size of it—at any rate we're taking a lot of the troops away. There's too much pressure elsewhere. It's



"Japanese population is increasing"

a bad business. What will happen to the Britons I don't know. They'll probably start fighting among themselves again, and the Picts and Scots will swarm over the Wall. And a lot of our chaps don't want to leave. Britain's a much pleasanter country than it used to be. There are nice towns, and villas dotted about the countryside. A lot of our men have married British girls, and feel like settling down there. Just before I left a centurian who was under orders came to me with tears in his eyes and begged me to let him stay."

The Old Attitude

Napoleon manipulated the Press as skilfully as its condition permitted. He was an artist in the writing of communiques. But can anyone imagine a Press conference with Napoleon? Fancy a mere journalist putting a question in the light of those terrible eyes before which marshals and monarchs quailed! Wellington would have been cold and distant, if indeed he could have been induced to recognise the existence of a journalist. And right into our own time, the official attitude was similar. Statesmen and generals were not interviewed. Journalists belonged to no recognised estate, and were expected to pick up information as best they could. True, they did tag on to armies—though Kitchener hated them—and it was left to a non-European army—the Japanese—to keep them right away from the front. This gave some irony to the coming interview, for Lieutenant-General H. C. H. Robertson commanded the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces in Japan. This was 1948, and while the

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