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London Letter

SOUND AND FURY

(By Airmail — Special to
"The Listener")

DECEMBER 22

THE great Lysenko controversy (with which *The Listener* has already made its readers conversant*) has just been aired by the BBC, which persuaded Professor J. B. S. Haldane to come to the microphone with three other scientists. The occasion might have been more interesting than it was, but even so the *News Chronicle* printed a quarter-page spread by Ritchie Calder, explaining what significance it could have, and why it was likely to mean little; namely, because Professor Haldane was expected to withhold his judgment on Lysenko's theories until a full translation has been published of the 500 pages of discussion at the August Conference of the Soviet Academy.

That is just what did happen. Professor Haldane said that he disagreed with a lot of Lysenko's theories, but declined to pass any judgment until he has seen the translation. Until it comes out, he has several more months in which to consider in advance his position as a Communist and a geneticist whose theories are now denounced by Lysenko (and by the Soviet Academy of Agricultural Sciences).

In the meantime, he is accused by Dr. O. H. Frankel in a letter in the BBC *Listener* of misleading the public: "He

*T. D. Lysenko succeeded N. I. Vavilov as head of the Soviet Institute of Plant Industry about 1941. According to Professor Eric Ashby, formerly scientific attaché to the Australian Legation in Moscow (who discussed the relationship between Vavilov and Lysenko in a talk recorded for the NZBS about two years ago), Lysenko has more influence in political circles in Russia than he has standing in the scientific world. According to him, the principles by which heredity is studied all over the world are wrong principles and contrary to Marxian philosophy. In *The Listener* of May 9, 1947, Dr. O. H. Frankel, of Christchurch, wrote, "... The greatest contribution the world of science can make... towards a full resumption of the great work Russian geneticists and plant geographers did in the 'twenties and 'thirties under the leadership of N. I. Vavilov is to expose the medieval quackery of the Lysenko school."

does not 'talk Lysenko' to scientific audiences; he speaks with one voice to scientists, with another to the public." Dr. Frankel says that a man of Professor Haldane's standing as a popular writer on science "may be in a position to convert single-handed a clear-cut issue into a 'quarrel among specialists' where 'there is right on both sides.'"

It is proposed in London to establish an Institute of Recorded Sound; articles of association are being drafted and headquarters are being sought. The project is to build up sound-archives on similar lines to those of the British Film Institute, and 25 learned and technical bodies are ready to assist, including the Ministry of Education, the great recording companies, the BBC, the Arts Council, and the British Council.

It would establish a library of gramophone discs and other types of recording going back to the Edison period, strengthened by current output in four main categories: languages and dialects; speeches and historical events; scientific and medical; and music, Western and exotic. There are already some great commercial and private collections in Britain and if these were wholly or partly deposited with the Institute, the archives would soon contain about 200,000 discs.

There would be vocal records from the Caruso epoch, folk-song, animal sounds, and bird-song, irregular heartbeats, stammering and its stages of cure, and the instructions and comments uttered by a surgeon during a major operation.

WILL all England eventually talk BBC English? Sir Ernest Gowers, a former Civil Servant, whose book *Plain Words* (from His Majesty's Stationery Office) was a best-seller some months ago seems to think so. The BBC Year Book of 1948, which is just out, contains an article by him in which he says that in the BBC England has created the Academy of English



J. B. S. HALDANE



T. D. LYSENKO

A clear-cut issue may become a quarrel among specialists