

OLIVER DUFF, who was Editor of "The Listener" from its foundation until his retirement the other day, was an influential figure in many fields outside that of journalism, but the profile which we publish here, written for us by E. H. McCormick, M.A., is simply that of the man whose editorials and special articles became so familiar to "Listener" readers over the last decade. Shortly before he retired, Mr. Duff accepted an invitation from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to visit the United States, "in order to gain a more intimate understanding of the American people and their way of life," and he has already left New Zealand on his way to New York.



IN the past 10 years we have learned to expect from *The Listener* a valedictory note rare in journalism. The retirement of public men has in its columns been the occasion not for a fanfare of formal tributes, but for some attempt at appraisal. Muted by kindly praise or modified though it has been by the obvious, the decent limits of the valedictory circumstance, the critical undertone has been there for those intended to hear it. And now, only a few weeks after the characteristic tribute to Professor Shelley, the time has come to farewell Oliver Duff himself, the editor of *The Listener* since its inception. He is responsible for the tone of what follows—he has shown the way. It will soon be clear how far this particular tribute falls short of his standards of generosity and his standards of expression.

Oliver Duff's appointment to *The Listener* is one of those incidents that suggest a benign providence intermittently presiding over the acts of officialdom. It was pure luck that, when the National Broadcasting Service at length decided to publish a weekly journal, he was in Wellington, his work in the planning of centennial publications advanced to a point where it could be passed on safely to a reluctant amateur. Had he not been free at the time or had he shrunk from this new and not very attractive venture in official journalism, *The Listener* would not be the paper we know. Conceivably it might have been better than it is, but the chances are that it would have been somewhere between the extremes of arid official "organ" and vapid guide to the world of entertainment. At any rate *The Listener* one knows, the weekly we open with a sense of expectancy, is Oliver Duff's creation; for, like all good editors, he has given to the paper the impress of his own mind and character; it bears upon it his personal stamp.

WHAT kind of person Oliver Duff is could, then, be deduced, in part, from *The Listener* and in particular from the page he has made his own. Fifty-two times a year for 10 years with—I infer from the evidence of style—only rare intermissions, he has filled a column with comment not confined to the affairs of the Broadcasting Service; in point of fact an editorial bearing on the diffusion of culture through the ether has been exceptional. Events in New Zealand and in the larger world beyond, books, people, battles, erosion, birds—these and countless other topics have given Oliver Duff the im-

pulse for the weekly editorial flights, measured to the last syllable, phrased in that concrete antithetical style, verging towards—but never quite reaching—paradox, that he has perfected. That editorial style, it seems to me, is the verbal equivalent of the bluff manner assumed for everyday purposes and in the presence of strangers; and both style and manner were perhaps protective devices first assumed to meet the needs of daily journalism.

If I were asked to define in a word the quality common to the editorials, I would hazard "wisdom," hoping the term would embrace both the pure essence and its wordly equivalent. The five hundred editorials—in the aggregate a fat volume—have conveyed the impression of a mature intelligence sharpened by conflict with the world, deepened by experience, given breadth by warm human sympathies. They have been wise, shrewd, usually tolerant, and nearly always generous. They have expressed solid character in an age more notable for nonentity or bogus "personality."

It would be absurd, of course, to suggest that *The Listener* editorials have been uniformly good. The tap of wisdom cannot be turned on at will 50 times a year, and sometimes the editorials have been slight, sometimes, I think, when Oliver Duff has touched on some political issues or when he has been misled by strong feelings, they have been wrong-headed. Occasionally the vesture of wisdom has, on examination, proved to enclose a centre of nothingness; for Oliver Duff can be a master of verbal legerdemain. In fact, I bear him a mild personal grudge for creating so skilfully the illusion that an official journal can be wholly independent and wholly outspoken. Through courage and principle, he has extended and sometimes overpassed the limits of what may be said in a Government-sponsored publication. But certain limits remain. It may be significant that a part of Oliver Duff, excluded from the editorials, has spread over to find expression in the adjoining columns. The notes to correspondents disclose the student of scripture, the adept in the art of diabolical quotation; they also reveal the warm human being pricked by conceit and pretence into asperity or rudeness; more regrettably, they show up the casuist, the quibbler in the cause of editorial infallibility. (What a revolution in journalism would be caused by the simple admission, "I'm sorry I was wrong last week!") It was not until Oliver Duff combined his editorial functions with those

of wandering observer that his deeper concerns found something like complete expression. The "Sundowner" series, made possible by a wise dispensation of the authorities, was the fulfilment of an old ambition in which his passionate interests were combined—his interest in the land, his interest in people, and his interest in New Zealand. These articles, in a sense, expanded and documented the briefer, more intuitive conclusions of the centennial survey, *New Zealand Now*; they proved that there was a species, the New Zealander, while they exhibited him in his variety; they defined the differences, subtle but real, between south and north, east and west; they opened a window on the New Zealand that Oliver Duff knows and to which he belongs, the New Zealand beyond the cities. For the series not only served its ostensible purpose, but also filled out the portrait of "Sundowner"—rooted in the South Island and, specifically, in Central Otago; morally based on the Presbyterian faith and the Bible; liberated in young manhood by Whitman, Thoreau, Emerson, and South Africa; venturing in adult years far beyond the native confines and native pieties, to return again, the circle rounded, in maturity.

But (again the carping qualification) good as the "Sundowner" articles were, they did not compare in depth, colour, or liveliness with the accounts one had from his own lips during the traveller's occasional returns to Wellington. Oliver Duff is not a brilliant conversationalist, but he is a great talker, the greatest artist in that perishable medium I have known. To hear him relate an episode in the epic of his wanderings, and then to read the corresponding article in *The Listener* was to experience a sense of loss. Limitations of space and time, regard for the conventions, respect for the sacred laws of hospitality—all these conspired to diminish the effect. If, somehow, these limitations could have been transcended, possibly by the adoption of a fictional framework (one of Oliver Duff's discarded selves is the Great New Zealand Novelist), this series would have been something more than supremely good journalism; indeed the possibility of such transmutation still remains.

THE Oliver Duff I am seeking—the creator of *The Listener*—has quite properly made his influence felt outside the pages he himself has written; his presence lies behind the regular "features" and the occasional contributions. Here, being a just and conscientious editor, he has had to balance desire against duty, personal preference against the declared purpose of his

journal and the demands of his public; he has also had to make the best use of whatever talent lay to hand. In *The Listener's* reviewing columns, in the generous space it has given to the arts, in its concern for the land and the farmer, in the perhaps over-frequent symposia on education, the editorial inclinations have been clearly discernible. The broadcasting features possibly reflect a less intense enthusiasm, though in this matter I am scarcely qualified to judge.

I have sometimes thought *The Listener* expended disproportionate space and effort on its reviews of current films—the equivalent in literature of solemnly dissecting the weekly output of light to middle-brow fiction. To which opinion Oliver Duff might well reply, "*The Listener* is not written for prigs and pedants." That retort, imaginary but typical, may suggest the peculiar distinction of *The Listener*. That a weekly journal of its wide circulation and nominal character should have maintained standards of writing and taste, that it should have practised discrimination where discrimination is rare and amongst a public to whom the notion is alien—that is a real achievement impossible without a firm guiding hand.

And now, having created *The Listener*, Oliver Duff has retired. The feeling shared by his staff and his contributors must, I am sure, be one of sadness. They will miss the genial presence, the courtesy, the superb talk, and the notes, so often scribbled "in haste," so scandalous in their disregard of departmental forms and clichés. Readers of *The Listener*, too, in spite of the reassurance they have in the appointment of a successor, must also regret a change that means, presumably, the end of "Sundowner" and the waspish "Ed." Only a small minority may have other feelings—victims of rare petulance, perennial correspondents, political dissidents. I must align myself with that minority. I am glad Oliver Duff is retiring, and, after the first pang of severance, I think he will be glad, too. When tribute has been paid to the New England deities, when the spectacle of New York has been taken in, when the ten-thousandth American farmer has been seen and questioned—experiences that I trust we may share—Oliver Duff doubtless intends to return to the South Island, there to end his days in farming, quiet rumination, and uninterrupted talk. My hopes for his future are different. I hope that, freed from all external limitations at last, he will write the books whose qualities have as yet been barely suggested.

