

TRAMPS DEFEND THEMSELVES

"THE MERCHANT NAVY FIGHTS: Tramps against U-Boats." By A. D. Divine. John Murray, publishers, London.

IN the early days of this war cold, formal Admiralty messages announced the sinking of merchant ships and the destruction of German U-boats. There were no details, merely precise statements of fact. Yet behind the loss of each ship was often a tale of courage as fine as anything in the

long history of the sea. Four of the ships which met the German blow were the Stonepool, the Heronspool, the Rockpool, and the Otterpool—blunt, squat merchant vessels. Neither their funnels nor their bridges knew any nonsense about streamlining, or even about art. They were built to carry cargo and every line suggested a maximum load with a minimum of fuss and bother. Their speed was between eight and nine knots; if they did more they were flying. Each ship carried one small

anti-submarine gun and one anti-aircraft gun, mounted in the stern since that is demanded by international law. And under that law such ships fight only to defend themselves in flight; they must never attack.

Yet those ships fought, courageously, splendidly, against overwhelming odds. One was sunk by bombs. When her guns were put out of action her captain lay on his back on the deck, firing at a great Heinkel bomber with his old rifle. It is a stirring story. It gives a lift to the heart to read that men will fight in such circumstances.

The Stonepool was filled with coal, lumbering through the Atlantic when the U-boat put a shot across her bows just after dawn. Within minutes the little gun was manned, the captain swung his ship ready for fight. For hours he fought the U-boat dodging her torpedoes, turning in the ocean like the hunted thing that old ship had become. Shells from the U-boat splintered her side, leaving a gaping hole through which the water poured. Her lifeboat was wrecked. Then, as she fired her 15th shell, something happened. The shell had found its mark and the U-boat threshed the water helpless. When, hours later, a destroyer arrived, she was scuttled by her crew.

For hours the Rockpool fought another U-boat—and won. She was on her way back to England, but lost her protective convoy in trying to repair a lifeboat which had been damaged in a terrific storm. This was perhaps the most gallant fight of all, if comparison may be made in courage, faith, and the certitude of victory. Three torpedoes missed their mark as the ship turned and twisted in the water; the 4-in. gun misfired and for the remainder of the fight she was fired by a lanyard. Untrained gunners lined their sights on a target which sat like an armchair on the waste of water. When the bubbling evil track of a torpedo came towards the ship the second officer asked: "North or south, sir? Shall we toss for it?" "Toss nothing," said the captain. "South!" and the ship swung off her tortuous course again. Thus the fight went on, from noon until far into the night. The ship's officers prayed for a fog; a full moon came instead. Down in the stokehold every ounce of steam possible helped the ship to keep ahead of the U-boat. Then, as eyes strained over the moonlit water, the submarine disappeared. No flash came from her guns which, a few hours previously had scattered their wicked shrapnel over the ship in an effort to kill the gun crew. Slowly, steadily she made through the sea. When she reached the English Channel there was a welcome. They had got their U-boat. A destroyer had found her helpless on the water.

The stories of these ships have been admirably told by A. D. Divine in the first book of its kind to be issued since the outbreak of war. Each is a story of magnificent courage against terrible odds.

CRADLE AND GRAVE

AFTER THE FIRST 100 YEARS.
Report of the Birth Rate Committee of the New Zealand Five Million Club. Foreword by W. E. Barnard. 55 pp. 1/6d.

When anyone sets out to examine such a question as this he makes what is more or less a public inquiry into an

essentially private matter. That seems to have been the initial difficulty of the Five Million Club. They have had to rely on statistics limited in their effect because the Government Statistician faces similar limitations, and they have not had the opportunity to place in the field enough research experts to get all the personal information required.

However, they contrive to make such information as they have found available do a very thorough job of work. They prove their case—that New Zealand's population is on the decline: examine the reasons for it, assess the significance of it, and suggest remedies.

With all the handicaps, so freely admitted by the editors of this booklet, they still raise social questions of such vital importance that no one who reads their findings will put them by without feeling puzzled, if not thoroughly worried.

They are not sure whether social fashions or economic necessity should be considered the most important factors contributing to the decline in the birth

rate. They believe that contraceptive methods are now far more effective and far more readily available than they have ever been; and they believe they are being far more widely used. Whatever the reason, they see clearly enough

that New Zealand is running into a complicated social difficulty. They anticipate that the coming years will see far more middle-aged and elderly people than there are now, and they wonder just what this will mean: re-distribution of employment, a more reactionary spirit towards social legislation, incalculable burdens of old-age pensions falling on working-age-groups.

When they reach remedies, the Five Million Club's editorial committee come to a discussion, whether they realise it or not, of the ability of man as an individual to interfere with the evolutionary trends of cycles of man as a unit in group. They suggest education as one method of forcing up the birth rate, although there is no evidence to show that people will have larger families simply because they are told it will be better for them. They suggest the control of the sale of contraceptives through proper clinics, but do not produce evidence to show that this would work any more efficiently than prohibition worked in America. They suggest that economic encouragement should be given to parents, and here they seem to be getting somewhere, although they admit themselves that social causes contribute more to the decline than economic causes.

There are many virtues in this little publication. The greatest of these are the clarity with which it treats a subject not easily simplified and, more important, the frankness with which it admits that all is not known that might be known. It is this last feature which will leave readers with that stimulating sense of something still to be done. It is groping in the dark, like all social studies, with just enough dim light to make it worth while stretching the arm of research a little further.

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