

WAR, NEWSPAPERS AND THE BBC

"Journalism Cannot Afford To Become An Industry"

(By J. W. Robertson Scott, founder and editor of "The Countryman," in a recent issue of that paper)

AS I spent many of the best years of my life doing my bit in the production of daily papers, I have no mind to "crab" the Press. Also I have never had the least inclination in my life to be anything else than a journalist and I am the very firmest believer in journalism.

But I wonder what the historian of the Press will make of its recent record—before and during the War. One would have thought that the coming of the BBC, not to speak of so many private newsletters, would have put the Press on its mettle, that it would have thought of all sorts of new methods. At first, all the newspapers could think of about the BBC was to boycott it. That was found to be impossible. Now the complaint is that the Ministry of Information is not playing fair between Press and Wireless; and one finds space given to letters girding at the BBC for some of the best descriptive reporting of our generation.

Have the daily papers made all the advance they might since the advent of the BBC? Can too much of their thinking have gone into circulation-getting? I remember well the introduction into the Press of the interview—how shocked people were!—and of illustrations of what was called the "New Journalism," sponsored first by W. T. Stead and then by Harmsworth. (The first illustrations in the "Pall Mall Gazette" were by that clever black and white artist, the late Fred Pegram. He was then a lad of only sixteen). There was also the surprise form of the handy "Pall Mall Gazette," a large folio. (The later "Westminster Gazette" was just twice its size. So is the "Evening Standard" in its modern shape.) These were all developments.

Influence of Advertising

In my time nearly all the daily papers have undergone companionification, have suffered grouping under a few large proprietors, have transformed themselves into an industry, have obviously come more and more under the influence of

the advertising world. But journalism, when it gets away from being the adventure of one man and his associates in opinion, loses something which it is difficult to recover. It certainly cannot afford to become an industry.

For one thing, an industry is under a continual inducement to play for safety. It is also disastrous when its lodestar becomes social distinction. An indication of stiffness in the joints is surely the inability of the papers substantially to lessen, with the reductions in size imposed by paper shortage, the amount of space given to headlines. It is still, in several of the dailies, not far short of a quarter of that occupied by the text.

Little that is New

I looked forward to the receipt from New York of the new daily, "P.M.," in the hope that it might break new ground. But except for the bold notion of doing without advertising—and the "Reader's Digest" was before it in this years ago—it offers little that is new.

The starting of new publications is forbidden in Great Britain during the war, or I should not have been surprised to see some gallant journalist, with skill, imagination, experience, authority, and the best connections, finding support for a daily journal of the kind I used to talk about as a young man in Fleet Street. It was to consist of only a double sheet of foolscap of good paper, and the notion was that it would readily sell at sixpence or a shilling, for it would contain nothing but exclusive, well written and witty paragraphs of news and comment from home and foreign sources—in other words, be the very best kind of London Letter.

What We Needed

Apropos, what can be said of the failure of the Press to discover ways of getting worth-while news out of Holland, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, and France? We are keen to know how the civilisations of these countries are facing up to their trials. And what of the failure of the Press, before the War, to provide that for which some of us have been asking for years, mail letters from abroad of the highest quality, not only in writing but in illustration? Even from the United States the intelligence has been pitifully inadequate, chiefly politics and crime. In comparison, the foreign correspondents of the American papers concern themselves with literature, art and social life as well as these subjects.

Our Press has fallen short over one of its most vital jobs, to keep us in touch with all the best that is thought, said and done outside our own country. From the effects of this inefficiency we are now suffering. What we have needed from "Our Own Correspondents," in addition to brief cables, have been the letters they and their wives sent to their friends.

Difficulties of Journalism

I need hardly add that criticism of the newspapers does not mean forgetfulness of their difficulties since September, 1939, or sympathy with designs on the freedom of responsible journalism. The shortcomings and foibles of the Press—which so faithfully reflect the shortcomings and foibles of the Public—do not obscure the fact that its rank as the Fourth Estate of the realm has been earned. If, by the way, it should be suggested that, in such notes as these in "Day by Day," and in a wide range of topics in "Books I am Glad to Have Seen" and "A Fruit-Grower's Diary," *The Countryman* is away from the country, the answer is that it is away deliberately. It would not say much for the spirit and intelligence of men and women who live in the country if, in the greatest moulding period through which the English-speaking world has passed, our minds were on gardening, farming, rural life and character, bird and wild life and natural beauty alone.

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