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# THE BRITISH AND THEIR ARMY:

To The Editor.

Sir,—Your long review of "Boomerang's" book on the British Army of to-day makes painful reading. No doubt much of what he says is justified. The British Army, like the nation of which it is a part, is in a state of transition. The class organisation of the nation was changing before the war, and the process is being accelerated by the war. The Army is changing with it, but the process is neither easy nor painless. But what I want to say with all possible emphasis is, don't put all the blame on the Army. The greater part of the blame lies with the nation, which in peacetime has always refused to take soldiering seriously. The British soldier, said Napier of the Army in the Peninsula, fought in the cold shade of an aristocracy. It beat the armies of France that fought under the stimulus of revolutionary fervour. The British Army still fights in that shade, and the British people have been content that it should be so. It has left the officering of the Army to the aristocracy and the upper middle class, and until Mr. Hore-Belisha improved matters, it would not pay officers an adequate wage. In nothing has the British public been more stupid than

OUR recent review of "Bless 'Em All," an Australian writer's book on the British Army, brought us more letters than we could accommodate on our ordinary correspondence page. We have therefore taken three of the most typical of these letters and made a special feature of them here.

its attitude to defence. Fifty odd years ago a young English idealist, Henry Nevins, who was to give his long life to the service of freedom and unpopular causes, came back from Germany deeply impressed with the effect that military service had on German youth. He wanted England to learn something from Germany in this respect. No London paper would publish his ideas, until one did for the express purpose of tearing them to pieces editorially. In subsequent years oceans of nonsense were talked on the subject. Military training was militarism. One volunteer was worth three conscripts. Britons were free men, not slaves, and they claimed the freedom to refuse to prepare for the defence of

their country. For that reason they actually regarded themselves as superior to Continentals. One M.P. said in the Commons that if England were invaded "a million bayonets would flash in the sun," to which it was pertinently returned "let 'em flash 'em as has 'em."

As most regularly in British history—as regularly as trough follows crest at sea—the Army was neglected in peacetime. It may not be generally realised that Kipling's famous poem expressed literal truth. Publicans did have the damned insolence to refuse to serve men in uniform. But when war came it was "special train for Atkins." Then in 1914 Britain came up against a nation of soldiers. To save herself she had to become the same. Fortunately in the years between the South African war and the First World War, Britain had a great war Minister and a band of enthusiasts to back him. The result was that the British Army, though small, was very efficient—Von Kluck, who was in the best position to judge, said it was the finest army in history—and it not only helped to stem the German onrush, but formed a nucleus on which a national army could be built. Haldane had his reward; he was hounded out of public life.

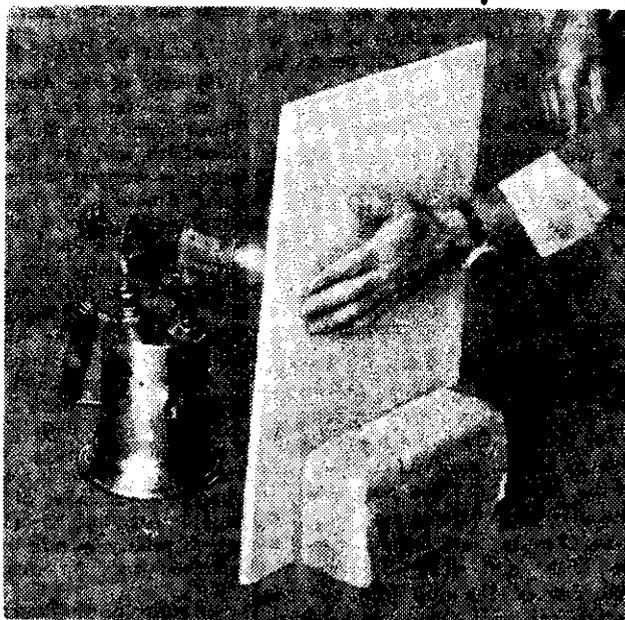
In the years before 1939, says "Boomerang," Britain neglected her youth. She did. But what would have been the response if Governments had tried to train that youth? Didn't Stanley Baldwin confess that he could have told the nation the truth about Defence, but didn't because it would have cost him an election? Very reprehensible of Stanley, but he knew his electorate. When, shortly before this war, Britain reintroduced conscription because she had made commitments on the Continent, there was strong opposition. No, Britain has got a better army than she deserves.

As to the defeats in this war, they have been bad and depressing enough, but let us be fair. How could Dunkirk possibly have been avoided? Twenty times the tank and aeroplane strength wouldn't have saved the British Army from retreat to the beaches, nor would any strategy or tactics. The Belgians on the left had surrendered; the French on the right were collapsing. Surely only an army very well trained and handled could have reached the beaches at all. And the Army has had its successes. Quite properly "Boomerang" praises the Navy. But the Navy's success has been won partly at the expense of the Italians. What about the Army's exploits against the Italians? What about the East African campaigns, in which a great and very difficult territory was conquered by a force that was only a fraction of the enemy's in numbers? Considering that when Italy came into the war Britain had only a corporal's guard in Egypt, posterity may say that we were a bit fortunate to be as far from Alexandria as seventy miles in July, 1942. And an Army which after a long and gruelling retreat like that of the last few weeks,

(Continued on next page)

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