

MICROBES OR HUMAN LIFE?

TWELVE months after his return to New Zealand with a University of London doctorate, Ian D. Blair is not sure whether the Dominion's greatest need is long-distance war on hostile micro-organisms or immediate war on the farmer's life problems. It was the same, he told *The Listener* the other day, when he was in America. He went to the United States on a Carnegie fellowship to observe research developments in micro-biology. But before he had been long in that country he became so conscious of the social and cultural problems of thousands of farmers that he found himself working two fields simultaneously—one biological, the other sociological. Now that he is back in New Zealand, he finds the same questions arising. Should science attack soil and seed and fertiliser problems only or should it at the same time light up the farmer's environment—bring him to terms with it and help him to that place in the country's counsels to which the importance of his work entitles him?

N.Z. Conditions Different

He agrees at once that there is no such thing in New Zealand as the "rural problem" of the United States. "We are a small homogeneous community. We have no illiteracy, and very few people, if any, completely removed from the reasonable amenities of life. But this does not mean that we have no rural problem at all. It means simply that our problem is less sharp and ugly than we see it in the United States."

It must also be remembered, Dr. Blair reminded us, that the balance between agriculture and manufacture is much more favourable in the United States than it is in New Zealand. "It is impossible to avoid some drift from the country to the towns. Boys, and girls, too, of a certain type will always find town life more favourable to their development than country life can be, and nothing that science can do will alter that. The problem in New Zealand is not to stop that drift, but to keep it at its natural rate. In other words, we must make country life interesting enough, and socially satisfying enough, to keep those people at home who cannot leave without national loss."

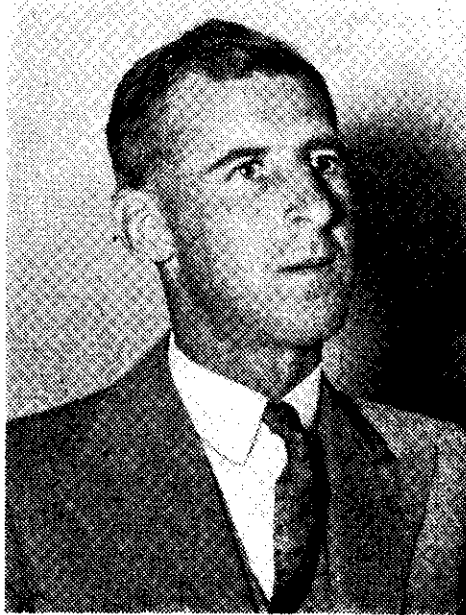
Stopping the Drift

That was the problem, and it was no use pretending that anybody had a simple solution.

"Simple solutions," Dr. Blair said, "are usually too simple. Communities do not drift for years away from sanity and safety if anybody knows how to stop the drift. But we can see some things that ought to be done. If the boys most suited for farming are to be given a

A Biologist In A Quandary...

Should science attack soil and seed and fertiliser problems only, or should it at the same time light up the farmer's environment—bring him to terms with it and help him to that place in the country's counsels to which he is entitled?



DR. IAN D. BLAIR
It was the same in America

chance to farm, they will have to be assisted financially. It is possible that the whole system of land tenure will have to be recast—perhaps in the way indicated last year in Professor E. R. Hudson's pamphlet, *The Future of Farming*. But that is a problem for other people. What concerns me at present is how to make country life seem like the good life to those who live it."

Are Farmers Unhappy?

Did he then think that farmers and their families were unhappy; or if not unhappy, frustrated and less than satisfied? What was lacking in their lives that could be supplied?

"The first thing lacking is a conviction that there is no life so good as theirs. They feel that most of the good things go past them—that town people not only do less work, but have more pleasures, high and low. The best libraries, the best music, the best pictures, all the things that appeal to cultivated people are beyond their reach. So are the excitements that appeal to the crowd. The farmer feels that the scales are weighed against him, and especially against his children."

"He has compensations?"

"Yes, many. But compensation is something you receive in return for

something you give or have taken away from you. I don't want to compensate farmers. I want them to feel that living in the country is great gain. It is not sufficient to reconcile them to their lot. They must feel that they would not change places with kings."

"And that means what?"

"It means making their lot as good as that. I would begin with their own schools and colleges—with Lincoln, with Massey, with Feilding and Rangiora High Schools, perhaps with the District High Schools. At present the more successful a student is in one of these places the more certainly his district loses him. He becomes a specialist in some branch of farming, and specialism means digging yourself deeper and deeper into your chosen ditch till you can't see round about you."

"What does the farmer want? Surely the aim of agricultural colleges is better crops, better stock, better seeds, fewer pests—in a word, more guaranteed successes and fewer threatened failures?"

Dr. Blair would not agree. These were only some of the things that education should provide; essential things, of course, but very much less than the full story. A farmer was a citizen as well as a farmer. He should be educated as a citizen. Farm colleges should help him to understand world problems as well as soil problems.

"It is not a question of filling him up with a dreamy idealism, or offering him culture as an escape. He should be educated to live, not to run away. He must face his problems factually, not sentimentally. But it should be understood that he has precisely the same human problems, the same hopes and desires and needs as city people, and education should help him to realise them. It will be a big step forward when our two agricultural colleges establish departments of rural education. Meanwhile, they could establish lectureships in current affairs, say, or even ask leaders of thought from the social and political fields to give occasional talks. The problem is to create a better balance between existing technical instruction and knowledge of current affairs. It is not a question of preaching at farmers, but teaching the rising generation of students what agriculture problems mean in political and social terms. Let us remember that this human material is as good as any in the community. It includes young men and young women who would become local (and occasionally national) leaders if their potentialities were developed. I am sure that they could be developed if we remembered that they exist—that the farmer thinks as many non-technical thoughts as the lawyer, the doctor, the architect or the engineer, and dreams as many non-technical dreams."