

NOVEMBER 5, 1943

Writers and Reviewers

IN a letter printed in another column on this page one of the authors selected for inclusion in the second volume of *New Zealand New Writing* complains of the manner in which the volume was reviewed. He says, first, that our reviewer "seemed to grudge conceding that the writing was promising," and second, that a review is useless to a young writer unless it tells him specifically what his writing lacks. The first statement is merely foolish. Our reviewer praised what he thought was good, and said that he would be glad to be proved wrong about the rest. A reviewer who is not grudging with flattery—in short with lies—is a salesman and not a reviewer; and a bad salesman, too. But reviewing is not salesmanship. It is a service to the reader of books, not to their writers or publishers. Its purpose is to pass on, in whatever space is available, an honest opinion about a book submitted to it for judgment; to pass this opinion to the public, not to authors or printers. It is not even criticism, though the nearer it approximates to criticism the better it is in general, if not always. It would obviously not be good reviewing to print in a popular journal what only highly educated people could understand. But in general the nearer a reviewer gets to critical standards the more helpful he is likely to be to those for whom he is writing; and in the case under discussion our reviewer was careful to point out that an opinion on this book must be based on the standards by which it was judged. It might have meant something to the writers themselves to say that they were young, or "feeling their way up," or attempting "something new in the land;" but that was not what our readers wanted to know. They wanted to know whether the book reviewed was a good or a bad book by *Listener* standards, interesting or dull, important or negligible—and this they were told as respectfully as our reviewer could put it without dishonesty.

LETTERS FROM LISTENERS

DOCTORS AND VITAMINS

Sir,—“Janus” states that “the opinions of the average doctor on the question of vitamins and diet must be accepted with a great deal of reserve.” I submit that there is no one in this country better qualified to offer their opinions, or rather their knowledge, of this subject than the medical profession as a whole and its members individually. If “Janus” imagines, as he seems to, that doctors do not realise or esteem the value of these things, he totally misunderstands the position. He is quite correct in saying that the time will come when doctors will banish a great deal of sickness from the land with the help of diet and vitamins, but—they will never be able to achieve that until they are accorded the co-operation of the general public.

Recently, the headmaster of one of our most prominent secondary schools remarked that he did not approve of the teaching of food and food-values, because it might make the pupils food-faddists! If that is the attitude of influential and supposedly educated men, how can we make such progress?

It is for these reasons, sir, that we require broadcast sessions on food and vitamins, and we want more of them and bigger, better and brighter, too.

“Janus” also mentions several aspects of medical progress which he alleges were “implacably opposed” by the “stultifying conservatism” of the profession. That is a gross exaggeration and distortion of the facts, again based probably on erroneous ideas of hearsay. That there has been some opposition to some of these is quite true, but not by any means to the extent suggested. “Janus” should realise that almost every reformer the world has known has been opposed by his fellows; it is only human nature that a section of every interested community should rebel against new ideas introduced into its established methods, and doctors being after all, only human, are no more to be condemned for that than any other group of workers, be they theologians, educationists, industrialists or politicians. In point of fact, the opposition has not been implacable or even serious. It might interest “Janus” to know that Pasteur, although not a medical man himself, found his supporters and champions not among his fellow scientists, but among the leaders of the medical profession. And to-day, in New Zealand, the medical profession, so far from opposing dietetics and social medical services, favours their development (although admittedly the manner in which the latter service should be operated remains a difficult issue.)—“STUDENT” (Wellington).

(“Janus” may, if he wishes, reply briefly and this correspondence will then be closed.—Ed.)

MAORI-ENGLISH

Sir,—I wish David Macdonald had gone further in his plea that the teaching of the phonetics of the Maori language be compulsory in our primary schools. I would have the language itself a compulsory subject, not for its own protection, but for the maintenance of pure English by pakehas. Having given the subject some thought, I come to the conclusion that only by the

practice of the Maori vowel sounds can we be saved from the twang which is fast becoming characteristic of New Zealand speech.

It is difficult to describe the chief fault of our pronunciation. But hear a Maori pronounce cow. The easiest way to explain what is happening to English in this country is to get someone to shape his mouth into a broad smile, but keep the teeth fairly close together and then speak a sentence; the flat, toneless result will be recognised as typical New Zealand speech if you add the oi and eow sound. The remedy is to acquire a language like Maori, with its lovely open vowels. I often feel if the people who hang on the words of radio announcers, readers and actors in the hope of catching them out in the mis-handling of some unusual word or place name, would devote some of the energy to getting Maori spoken from the infant classes onwards, New Zealand might set the standard for musical English.—J.T. (Avondale).

NEW ZEALAND WRITING

Sir,—In your review of *New Zealand Writing No. 2*, you say: “Most of this writing is new, but not much of it is good.” You even seem to grudge conceding that the writing is promising and very good reader-value. In accepting the work of Isobel Andrews, David Hall, and Roderick Finlayson, you consider they have something to say, which, I suggest, is valueless to those of us who “have not yet arrived,” unless you specifically state what sort of condition one is in when one has something to say. I personally have a lot to say, on economics, on the philosophy I accept, but I find it impossible, as yet, to put it all into a short story written for the entertainment of others.

And you can also explain, perhaps, how any writer can arrive if he is not published by reliable magazines, like *New Writing*, and by people like Ian Gordon, and the members of the Progressive Publishing Society. We cannot tell our faults by what we have printed in popular magazines. Even Saroyan—apparently popular with boys and girls—felt his way up, as has every short story writer, whether he was Jack London or H. E. Bates. You have said nothing either, about the youth of the book, not that I’d wish to build up an argument on the basis of youth. But I would point out that this *New Writing* is something new in the land, new, and to judge from the folks with ideas about writing whom I meet, stimulating. Faults are inevitable. You generally find faults where there is youth. I for one agree that I have a good way to go (my piece in *New Writing* was written when I was 18) and think other New Zealand writers, published and unpublished, would confess as much, too. But we still feel entitled, if we are reviewed at all, to an appraisal of our worth as it is and not as it might be. Not all writers are thick-headed egoists, oblivious to drastic criticism.

D. W. BALLANTYNE (Auckland).

(We refer to this letter in our leading article.—Ed.)

ANSWER TO CORRESPONDENT.

E.M. (Howick).—Referred to Professor Gordon.



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