

(continued from previous page)

Why should Aldous Huxley and Compton Mackenzie be allowed to take the bread out of their mouths?

That question shouldn't need an answer, but nevertheless, I'm going to try to provide one, just for the sake of setting down certain things that I believe to be important.

Books Are Commodities

Literature is, of necessity, mixed up with commerce, because books are commodities. But it is necessary to draw a practical distinction between those authors whose sole aim it is to make money by selling their writings to the public, and those who set themselves certain literary standards. The purely commercial writer will be quite cynical. He will write stuff that he knows to be stale mutton, and sell it to the public as fresh lamb. As a way of making a livelihood, this is no worse than any others. But such a writer can claim no sympathetic treatment from the reviewer who is concerned with literary standards. The plea that he "has his living to make" will carry no weight. On the other hand, the writer who is concerned to maintain his literary integrity has nothing to gain, really, if a reviewer dilutes his standards of criticism in order to be kind. What on earth has he to gain? Only a fool is pleased with flattery.

If we were to protect local writers with customs tariffs, the commercial writer would certainly gain. But I see no reason why he shouldn't have to take his chance in an open field. If he can't make a living out of his pen, let him take up carpentry or some other honest trade. The effect on the writer of literary integrity, on the other hand, would be thoroughly bad. It would rob him of that integrity. Literature must be governed by intellectual freedom and intellectual responsibility. Critical standards should take no account of the age, sex, or nationality of a writer. If a critic allows his judgment to be distorted by the fact that a writer is trying to make a living, or is a cripple, or married a cousin of the wife's then he is doing no good either to the writer or to literature.

Merit Will Out

From the point of view of any serious writer, I don't think it matters three-ha'pence whether he is reviewed kindly or not—so long as he is not swayed by criticism that he knows to be ill-informed (whether kind or cruel). The really important thing is for him to get his work published. Once a work exists in printed form, it is impossible for it not to be given justice sooner or later. Once it is on record, its merits, if it has any, will be discovered by some critic. I am equally sure that if a valueless book is boosted into immediate success by bad reviewers, it will be "found out" before very long. What I am saying amounts to this—that I believe that it is impossible to suppress truth, except for a short time; and that mankind is, in the long run, guided by reason. If I didn't believe those things, I should despair of humanity.

My advice to writers is very simple. If you are a commercial writer, organise your racket properly. Use every means you can to get your books sold. (I once knew a man in London who wrote a novel, published it, wrote the blurb on the dust-jacket, and finished up by doing a flattering review of it for

one of the papers). You won't get any help from me—but carry on. If, on the other hand, you want to turn out work that is guided by high literary standards don't complain if critics apply those standards to you. Welcome any review, however antagonistic, that indicates that the reviewer has read English literature thoroughly, is aware of the proper nature of critical standards, and is attempting to uphold them. But don't be too much impressed by criticism of any kind, unless you find it illuminating.

Publishers Should Be Encouraged

I have said that the really important thing for a serious writer is to get his stuff printed and placed on record. For this reason the work of publishing books is a vital part of the process of building up a New Zealand literature. I think that New Zealand publishers should be given every possible encouragement—by journals and their reviewers, by writers, and by the general public. I consider that there is a good case for their being given State assistance. Publishers, of course, are dependent on writers for good writing, and on reviewers for good reviewing. They certainly can't exist without good writers. The point I have been trying to hammer in is that unless high standards both of writing and of criticism are maintained, New Zealand literature will get the blight. In that case, publishing, along with everything else, will go to the devil.



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