

COME OUT OF THE PARLOUR!

SOME months ago I wrote for *The Listener* my impressions of television in America. After a couple of months of living and viewing on the other side of the Atlantic, I am still impressed by the differences rather than by the similarities between the use of the medium in the two countries. America has sponsored television. It is paid for by the advertiser, who sees to it that his product is visibly enjoyed on the little screen. Britain, so far, has preferred to rely on the BBC. But, in spite of stiff opposition in the House, Parliament has approved commercial television, and within a few years England will have the kind of choice that in New Zealand is familiar—a YA and a ZB television competing and (one hopes) each improving the other.

Meantime television aerials sprout from every chimney top. Even in what are still regarded as the poorer parts of London the forests of H's and T's reach up through the smoke like the wire-sculptures in a modernist art-gallery. Television is now almost a yard-stick of the standard of living . . . need a man ask for more wages when he can manifestly afford to have television? We are even assured (by the police, too) that television has reduced the incidence of crime. The burglar is entertained night by night with quizzes and games and plays and tap-dancers and pious epilogues nicely timed to send him to bed with his plans for the small hours forgotten. A million sets in England and Scotland and Wales keep the family at home, the allurements of the night blissfully ignored.

It is a pretty picture; till one turns to the daily papers. There the story is different. Television for some time now has been getting a bad press. Radio writers comment on its deficiencies as compared with what the television fans call "steam radio." The other evening

we were treated to a half-hour of American television, recorded on film. Ed Murrow, the well-known American news commentator sat in his study in New York, gazing out of his window. Through the window appeared the profile of the Queen Mary. Murrow picked up his telephone and rang the Captain. The camera picked up the Captain in his cabin, surrounded by his family snapshots, his books and his mascot. We followed the Captain to the bridge and from the bridge to the deck (the evening skyline of Manhattan just over the Hudson River), and all the time Murrow and the Captain kept up a conversation. The scene went back to the New York studio. Through the window appeared the frontage of Eleanor Roosevelt's flat on East Side New York. Murrow picked up his telephone again. Mrs. Roosevelt's voice replied, and there she was, in her study, surrounded by her family snapshots. And so the programme went on.

The effect on the English press was considerable. Why, demanded writer after writer, cannot we have *this* kind of television? How much longer must we endure these third-rate plays, these second-rate documentaries, these fifth-rate parlour-games . . . and so on for a third of a column.

Although I am a confirmed admirer of the BBC, my sympathies are with the radio writers of the press. British television is, compared with American, poor stuff. In the States, though one has to endure the inanities of the advertisers with their packets of crunchier cereals and better cigarettes, one can often strike a programme that persuades you to remain and look. In England, with very few exceptions, the programmes are of such a nature and quality that were you to have them presented to you at the local cinema you would feel a real sense of grievance against the management. Unless the critical standards of the burglar are pretty low, I suspect he

★ PROFESSOR IAN GORDON, who took a close look at American TV in "The Listener" recently, finds something radically wrong with television in Britain where, he says, the staple entertainment is the parlour game—four people under a chairman who guess and guess and guess . . .



Spencer Digby photo

will soon take to sneaking out again on his unlawful errands.

The staple of British television is the parlour game. Most evenings it is the highlight of the programme. Four people sit in a row under the benevolent eye of a chairman and guess and guess and guess. One game is called *Down You Go*. The four experts are confronted with groups of blank spaces on a board. They have to fill in the spaces with letters and so guess at the catch phrase which the words (were they there) represent. Another is called *The Name's The Same*. The four experts are faced with some individual whose real name is William Shakespeare or A. Valentine or Topsy Turvey and once again they guess. At the moment the BBC is still recovering from a body blow it received when some of the neighbours of Oliver Cromwell rang up to say that they had recognised him and his name was only Smith. Next week the chairman of the panel spent a considerable time being frightfully apologetic.

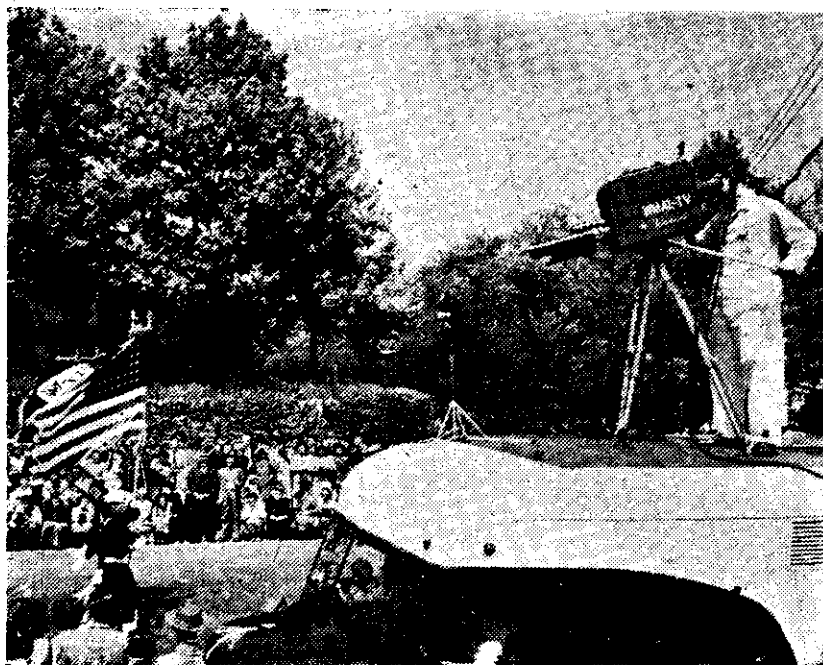
Star show of the week is *What's My Line?* The panel is faced with a man (or woman) who mimes a gesture representing his employment and the panel proceed furiously to guess his job, which is usually something like "pig-slapper" or "corset-lacer" or some such hilarious engagement. Part of the fascination of these shows, I suspect, comes from the incongruity of panel and victim. At least two of the panelled ladies are titled. The spectacle of a real live Viscountess probing into the occupational background of a potato-peeler from an Edinburgh fish-and-chip shop—particularly when the Viscountess is addressed by her first

name and the fish-lady is carefully addressed as "Madam"—is no doubt very good for democracy. But done week after week, it grows tedious.

Television (as American but not British politicians have discovered) brings wonderful publicity. "Reputations" are made on the screen with the same kind of ease as a wife-beater makes the morning headlines. Some of the stars of the parlour games are well on their way to being national figures. Lady Barnett's views are always good copy, and Gilbert Harding who appears once a week in *What's My Line* is discussed in the Tube ("Did you hear Gilbert make that mistake last night?"), and has what I can assume is the satisfaction of having, like Royalty, had a daily bulletin issued when he recently took to hospital.

Sound-radio programmes are divided into three channels, the Light, the Home and the Third. They grow progressively more highbrow in that order; but even the light programme is an affair of quality. It is difficult to see what has happened to the high standards of the BBC when the Corporation approached the more difficult but potentially even more powerful medium of television. Sir John Reith was a grim man, with grim and elevated ideas, but he did put a stamp of quality on the early years of the BBC which has been its hallmark ever since. Television seems to have been handed over to the lesser figures from the London entertainment world. One has only to compare week by week the names of the actors who still appear on sound radio with the minor stars of television drama to realise that there is

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"American television comes down heavily on the side of good reporting . . ."



... People in England say 'But you should have seen the Coronation programme' "