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Reith Lectures in Retrospect

THE first Reith Lectures were broadcast in New Zealand in 1949. They were welcomed in these columns as an event of much importance in the development of radio. "It may be too soon," we said, "to suggest that the Reith Lectures will restore an ancient vitality to the spoken word, but the possibility is obviously in the minds of those who planned the enterprise." Now that a new series is announced (on page 15), it may be appropriate to ask how far, after seven years, early hopes are being fulfilled.

We explained in 1949 that the lectures were intended to be "a stimulus to thought and a contribution to knowledge." Eminent thinkers were to be invited to "undertake some study or original research"; and the talks, much longer than is usual, would be "the year's highest point in the use of the spoken word." Since then there have been some notable lectures — notable in that they came from men with high academic qualifications, concerned with matters of profound interest. But they would have been notable if they had simply been published. None of them had any special quality which could be said to have been derived from its character as a series of talks for broadcasting. It is true that radio has provided a wider audience than the authors could otherwise have expected. People who had not heard of Professor J. Z. Young could struggle with his *Doubt and Certainty in Science*; and people who had heard of Robert E. Oppenheimer could welcome an opportunity to hear a great physicist and a controversial figure. But the response of an audience is what matters, and it is doubtful if these lectures can obtain the sort of response that was hoped for.

One of the conditions under which speakers are invited to take part is that the lectures will be published afterwards as books. This means that speakers will prepare their material with publication in view. Some books are admirably suited for broadcast-

ing; but they are strong in narrative and character, or the writing has that richness of metaphor which keeps the listener attentive. The expositions of Young and Oppenheimer, and of most other Reith Lecturers (Bertrand Russell was an exception), have been so abstract that a listener would need special training to follow them. There is only one way for the layman to grasp ideas about the structure and functions of the brain, or the approach to atomic physics — and that is by reading and re-reading, by spending an hour if necessary over a single page. A broadcast allows no time to pause and consider; when one idea has been absorbed the speaker is so far ahead that the thread of argument has been lost. It may be said that this will not matter if the listener is sufficiently stimulated to want to read the book: the broadcast and the book are two stages in a single experience. A broadcast is indeed successful if it leads to further study, but it should not necessitate a recapitulation of what has already been heard. The printed word can confirm and reveal: it should have an additional rather than an auxiliary function.

Experience has shown that short talks hold the attention better than long ones, and that if long talks are to be effective they should be prepared exclusively for listeners. They should not be too abstract; the ideas should be given ample and concrete illustration; and attention should be revived frequently by words which suggest images. The Reith Lectures may have made original contributions to thought; but they have been given by men so advanced in their disciplines that publication would always be available to them. The only test of their value in broadcasting must be their impact on listeners. It is difficult not to believe, regretfully, that they are slanted too much towards the printing press — an academic one, at that — and therefore are not, and cannot be, successful as a creative influence in radio.

N.Z. LISTENER, OCTOBER 26, 1956.