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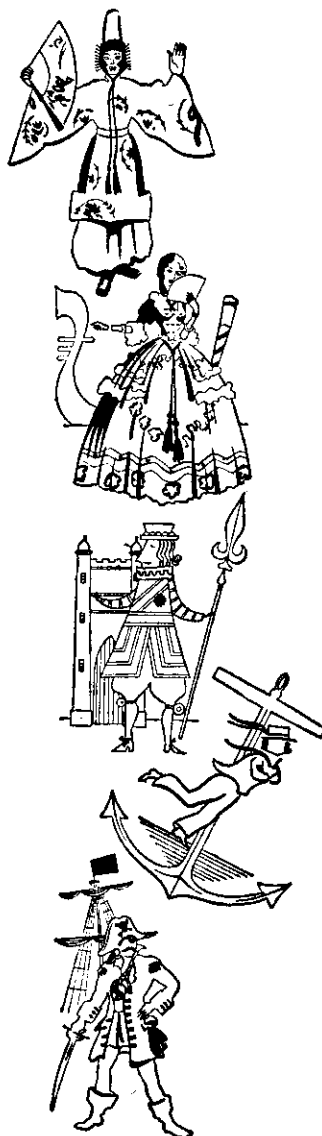
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No Room for Mr Micawber

A COMMENT heard recently in the Home News from Britain threw a thin light upon a changing social background. England, said the speaker, needed more individuals—more people of the sort who used to be known as "cards" and "characters." The comment would have seemed appropriate in New Zealand, where even a man with a beard may be looked at with a slight start of surprise; but it came with a strange sound from London, a city where exotic or eccentric persons have long been able to walk serenely among the crowds. Can it be that the robust variety of English life is beginning to disappear? Some support for the suggestion was given lately by a writer who pointed out that the larger-than-life characters of Dickens would be out of place in contemporary fiction, and that the novelist to-day should concern himself with ordinary people. Among the levelling influences of the welfare state there is now no room for Mr Micawber.

If people are beginning to look anxiously for expansive individuals, it may be supposed that the breed is not as plentiful as it used to be. We may be sure that nobody looked for "fantasticoes" in Elizabethan times: they were too obviously on the streets and in the taverns. The Victorians, too, had no need to complain about the flatness of their social scene. Yet is our situation quite as it has been represented? The varieties of human character are infinite, and are not pressed quickly into uniformity. It seems hardly possible that men of strange appearance and habits who only a few years ago were to be seen in the streets of London have drifted out of sight. The "character" beloved of novelists was generally a little less than respectable, and might even have been a plausible rogue—a Chichikov, bowling in his troika across the wide plains of Russia in search of "dead souls," or an impostor who liked to be received with deference by village officials. If all men are now honest, it is strange that the prisons should be so populous.

Is it possible that the "characters" are still among us but that we do not see them, or see them with disapproval and not with interest, simply because our attitudes are changing? Young men in stovepipe trousers who wear finery that offends their elders are given derisive names. They are thought to be dangerous, or at best a nuisance, though they are certainly trying to be "different," to stand out a little from the crowd. A few hundred years ago they might have been swaggering through London streets in clothes as bright as a peacock's feathers. If we read of such gallants in old plays we sigh a little for the colour and vitality of another age and wonder at the drabness of our own. No doubt the bullies and braggarts of Elizabethan times were as much a nuisance to solid citizens as Teddy Boys are reported to be in the poorer parts of London. Yet this did not stop Shakespeare and Ben Jonson from bringing them into their plays, full voiced and noisy, speaking for themselves and standing out distinctly as human beings.

At this point we may find a clue to what is really missing. The "characters" of the past shared a common eloquence. They were splendidly loquacious, and as the words poured from them they brought out the full flavour of personality. It may be true, or partly true, that the eloquence was borrowed, that no Falstaff could have existed without Shakespeare, and that Micawber could be gracefully feckless because he spoke in the voice of Dickens. Yet the dialogue of great writers is taken in the first place from the streets around them. There are passages in the Oxford anthology of English talk (see page 7) which owe nothing to novelist or playwright; they come from common speech. And what could a writer make of the conversation of Teddy Boys? It is idle to look for any revival of Elizabethan gusto. We must make the best of our own times, try a little harder to be safe and comfortable, and be satisfied with "case histories" instead of "characters." —M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, JUNE 28, 1957.