

BOOKS

Mental Hammer Blows

LIVING OPINION: A collection of talks from the BBC's Third Programme; Hutchinson, through the British Council. English price, 8.6.

(Reviewed by F. L. Combs.)

THE Third Programme of the BBC was an enterprise of great pith and moment which did not lose, its course and turn awry. Its purpose was ambitious indeed, being no less than to get over to an unseen world of listeners the best thought of the best minds of the day. The Third Programme is now firmly established.

What a change since Alfred Harmsworth, who never blushed to find himself known, brought out a new daily "written by office boys for office boys." That was half a century ago. Today radio, as the successor in widespread appeal to such dailies, finds a big audience for serious and quite often difficult thinking. The fact is of the greatest importance to radio, whose destiny it is to become the voice of civilisation, be that civilisation what it may.

How has it been brought about? Famous names help. Bertrand Russell, J. B. S. Haldane, Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth, Frank Lloyd Wright, and others, would command attention even if they talked nonsense, as Mr. Shaw came hilariously near to doing when he visited New Zealand some twelve years ago. They are guiding and governing minds, whose opinions sooner or later filter down to the average run of us.

But fame will not hold a radio audience if the famous one is a poser, or a bore, or if he hides his opinions behind a fustian curtain of conventional platitudes. These talks stimulate because they voice clear-cut and often stiff opinions, because the speakers are saying things they really think or know. In some way that seems to the writer almost magical, there is a vitamin in such untrammelled and trenchant self-expression that enlivens the mind of the reader, and has even more kick for the listener.

I submit two samples in proof of this.

But is the theatre healthy? The answer is a big "NO." It is suffering from an ossification of the tear ducts, a cold in the heart, thin blood, excess bile, weak eyes, inflammation of the tongue, and, quite simply, chronic constipation. . . . The doctors say in future that the patient should spend a restless night for his own good.

This from Peter Ustinov, who, for good measure, also finds space to remark, "The cinema hasn't an earthly. It is a mechanical and hybrid craft, masquerading as an art."

You can resent Mr. Ustinov, who has cultivated the art of stroking placid intelligences the wrong way, but you can hardly pretend not to have heard him.

A second sample. This time it is Niebuhr, American citizen and a champion of Christian philosophy. At odds with his getting and spending, his too acquisitive republic, he says:

I am a citizen of a nation which, I am persuaded, stands in grave peril for the future of its economic life because it is seeking uncritically and dogmatically to preserve the bourgeois and individualistic dogmas of the propertied classes of the last century on this question. [The question of the forms of property ownership desirable in the world today.]

Whatever risks one rashly takes with a glamorous film star, one should not

overpraise a mere book. *Living Opinion* is a short one, giving a score of talks. It is not overpraise to say that every talk contains forthright and even downright passages, that on every page there are dictums that are sound and wise, and that witty and pithy thoughts, cogently expressed, are liberally embedded in its contents.

It is heartening to think that in our modern world there are so many outstanding brains that have remained unthwarted and undistorted, that none of them dream of claiming plenary inspiration, that they all as a matter of duty bow their necks to the yoke of logic and facts, that as untrammelled individuals they do not shirk but welcome the task of "telling us truly what they do think." Such thinking as Emerson recognised a century ago, is one half democracy. The other half is world citizens given free and full access to such thinking. To provide such access is the most important function that radio could possibly perform.

TWO WAYS WITH NATURE

WILD BEAUTY, Nature in New Zealand in Photographs; Whitcombe and Tombs. Designed and Produced by Leon Studios.

NATIVE PLANTS, by Charles Masfield; A. H. and A. W. Reed. Price, 5/-.

A NEW ZEALAND town-dweller may not know a karaka from a broad-leaf, though he will know a kowhai in flower or out of flower, and he will know manuka even if he calls it tea-tree. But show him—or show his countryman—a drawing (even a good drawing) of totara and a drawing of matai, and the result will be—at any rate, in the cases I tried—a sad confusion. But show your city visitor to the hills an akeake in January and then take him home and show him a brilliant photograph in detail—he will recognise the net-patterned leaves and will never forget those winged seeds. For memory to serve, detail is essential; and the camera can present the most brilliant, the most life-like, and the most recognisable detail.

The Leon Studios in Auckland have now produced a set of superb photographs of plants and flowers to be seen by the visitor to the merest edges of New Zealand forest. The plants illustrated are mostly, but not all, natives; and all are briefly and simply described in notes opposite the photographs. Botanical terms are avoided, but an index of botanical names is appended. The co-operation of Miss B. Molesworth, botanist to the Auckland Museum, has assured accuracy of description.

The cover shows the kowhai in full bloom in very good colour; all other photographs, 30 large plates, are in sepia. It is to be hoped that this very good scheme may be extended to a second volume soon; for there is surely no better way of introducing or making memorable New Zealand's trees and plants.

A small book in the *Nature in New Zealand* series sets out to do in black and white sketches (continued on next page)



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