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AUGUST 10, 1951

Editorial and Business Offices: 115 Lambton Quay, Wellington, C.I.

G.P.O. Box 1707.

Telegraphic Address: "Listener," Wellington.

Telephone 41-470.

Billy Bunter and Hamlet

IN a talk for the BBC Third Programme, Edwin Muir suggested recently that imagination is declining in a world dominated by scientific method. "By the imagination," he said, "I mean that power by which we try to apprehend living things in their individuality, not as categories, and as they live and move, not as objects arrested for methodical study." We cannot have exact knowledge of ourselves or other people. Science is unable to answer moral or metaphysical questions which bear directly on the art of living. These questions are being asked today, as in the past; but Mr. Muir believes that we have grown too analytical in our thinking, and that we have to use a language which, under the influence of science, has become too abstract. "Science has made such enormous progress that all of us, a few expertly, a multitude ignorantly, think in terms of it, and in terms of it first; so that the use of the imagination no longer comes naturally to us; it is sometimes only an afterthought, or a comment on a theme already announced with greater authority elsewhere."

The situation may not be quite as bad as Mr. Muir believes it to be. An intellectual is inclined to generalise from his own sensitive response to experience; he does not always see that mankind in the mass remains cheerfully unscientific in human relations. Moreover, even when methods used in pursuit of knowledge or entertainment appear to be scientific, it may be shown that the underlying attitude is imaginative. Our meaning can be illustrated by the article on page 7, which reveals a widespread interest in boys' weeklies. People throughout the world are not merely collecting old copies: they are also writing about their favourite heroes and villains, often with a surprising talent for literary detection; and the tacit assumption—not more than half-serious—is that Billy Bunter, Sexton Blake and the rest of them are real persons. Superior readers may argue that people who study fiction of

this sort are bound to be credulous, the easy victims of illusion. But the same thing is happening, on a slightly higher level, to those who seriously concern themselves with the later history of Sherlock Holmes. And if it be said that here, too, we are among the simple-minded, we may point to the immense literature of interpretation which has grown up around a single character in one of Shakespeare's plays. A book recently published on Hamlet* contained pieces from more than 300 sources, and although the earliest was dated 1661, the majority came from modern writings. Hamlet has been examined from every conceivable viewpoint. He has been psycho-analysed; his religion, his morals and his physical health have been probed; and frantic attempts have been made to link his actions and motives within a consistent personality.

It could be supposed that in an age given over to abstraction and scientific method these imaginative excursions would be passing out of favour. The scientist, for instance, would begin by saying that since Hamlet, Sherlock Holmes and Billy Bunter have never existed no investigation need be undertaken. Yet the truth seems to be that enthusiasm has grown; and the scope of inquiry has widened from Shakespeare criticism to the cult of the penny dreadfuls. In all these activities, academic or amateur, may be found the same exuberance of imagination. Admittedly, the collector of boys' weeklies may be partly in search of his lost boyhood, but nostalgia is also a product of the imagination. Possibly the trend is a form of compensation in a technological age, and if this were true it would give support to Mr. Muir's theory. But it is simpler, and perhaps nearer the truth, to suggest that men are unchanged in their search for individuality—a search in which imagination, as always, is the supreme faculty.

*Readings on the Character of Hamlet, compiled by Claude G. H. Williamson; Allen and Unwin. English price, 45/-.