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The Vision that Failed

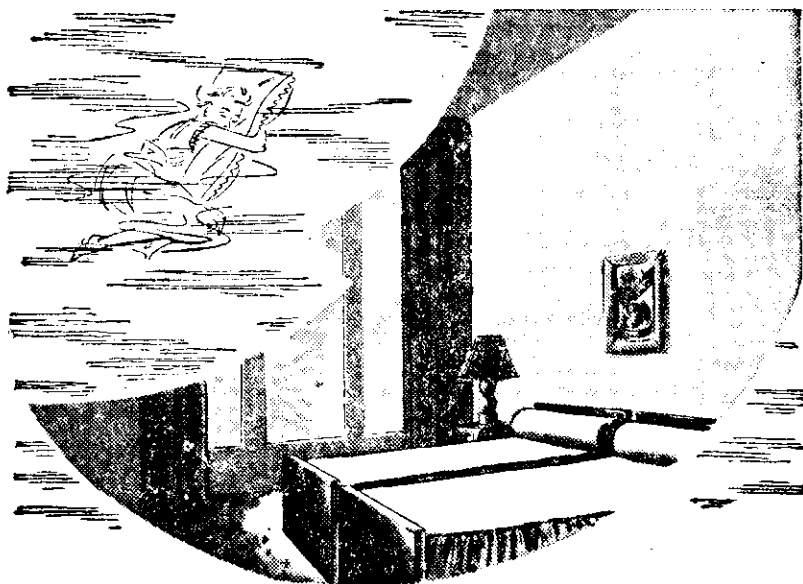
OUTSTANDING features of social history in Britain in the past fifty years will be brought back to listeners by the BBC series, *The Half Century*. The programmes were broadcast in England last year, but their subject is still close to us; indeed, for people who grew up in that period it can never cease to be interesting. It is retained, not merely in personal and collective memories, but in minds and characters, and therefore in our social climate. The shape of things to come is fixed for individuals and nations by what has happened in the past. But the things that come are never quite what we expect them to be. Men who looked ahead in 1900 seemed to have good reasons for optimism. It was easy to believe in progress; and the young, who believe also in the fulfilment of dreams, must have felt then that the world had exciting possibilities.

One way of examining a period is by discovering its effect on an intelligent person. A few months ago C. E. M. Joad wrote for the *New Statesman and Nation* an article entitled "What I Still Believe." It was a concise and subjective interpretation of one man's life in the first half of the century. Like many other intellectuals of his generation, Dr. Joad had the Utopian vision; and he was constantly disappointed. The emancipation of women, a cause in which he was active, appears to have had little effect. "They live harried lives, and work harder than they have ever done, having apparently overlooked the fact that in emancipating themselves they would emancipate the charwoman as well." Dr. Joad then became a pacifist, and his opinions must have been influential; but in 1940, a fateful year in England, he recanted. He grew up with the conviction that the political future must belong to socialism. Now that it has been attained in Britain "in a degree," he sees uneasily "the establishment of a certain level of drabness extending to a not too distant horizon of universal mediocrity." Finally, science was to have

brought about a general improvement in our ways of living; but for Dr. Joad the world has not been made easier to live in, and he thinks scientific weapons may destroy our civilisation.

Disappointed Utopians are inclined to blame their leaders—that is, the thinkers who had grown up in the 19th Century. Dr. Joad adjusted his own outlook with the help of two opposite doctrines, Marxism and Christianity. In seeming to accept the Marxist view that "the social scene is no more than the by-product of the economic structure that underlies it," he clings to an earlier optimism, for the belief inherent in this theory is that all will be well when economic weaknesses and injustices have been removed. Yet he has also come to believe that the Christian doctrine of original sin "expresses a deep and essential insight into human nature." It is difficult to understand how, if this be true, the human race is to be made rational and good by economic changes. Dr. Joad's confession of error was honest, but it led him to meagre conclusions. Although he still believes in reason and morality, and is convinced that certain "political goods" are needed in society, especially liberties of thought and expression, education and tolerance (to be secured "only in a democracy") he says nothing of the value of his journey. It is easy to be wrong, though hard to confess it; and a man must do some good to himself and to his fellow citizens if he works unselfishly for causes in which he believes. Liberal optimism failed, as it was bound to do, because it thought of progress too much in material terms. The world is not quite as frail, to most of us, as Mr. Hoyle would have us believe; but it is too frail to contain the full significance of spiritual experience. And although fifty years is a small phase in history, it is a long time in an individual life—too long, perhaps, to be needed for the discovery that man is by nature sinful.

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 24, 1951.



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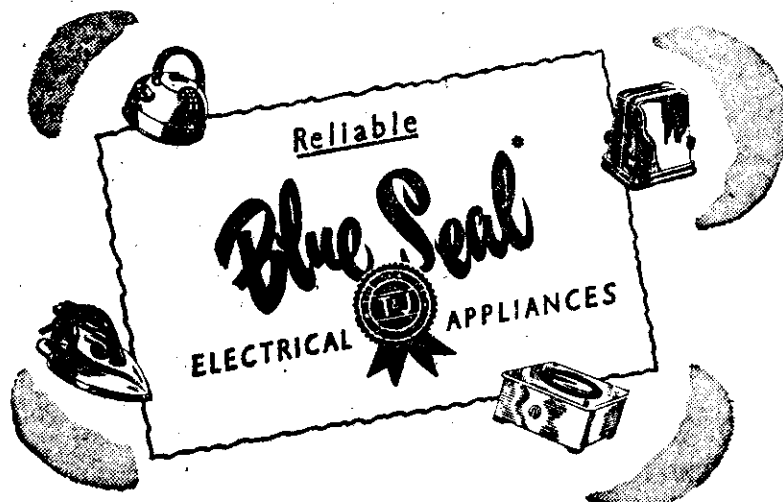
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