

THE LAMPHOUSE

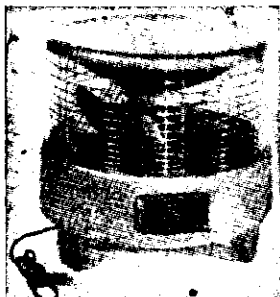
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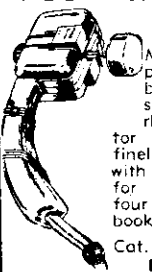
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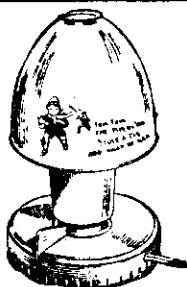
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The Unbalanced Crowd

IN a recent address to a Rotary conference in Palmerston North, reported in the newspapers, Dr. E. M. Blaiklock, of Auckland, referred to brilliant children. They should not, he said, "be allowed to be immersed in the crowd." And turning to the wider implications of his theme—"The Crowd in History and Social Life"—he warned his audience "against action through emotion rather than through reason." It seemed obvious, from a condensed report, that Dr. Blaiklock was thinking of dangers which arise when people who have not been properly educated pass under the influence of demagogues. Events in the past 20 years, especially in Germany, have indicated that the dangers are not imaginary. Throughout history it has been shown that crowd rule is bad rule, and education is not a defence unless it reaches high standards.

It is true, as Dr. Blaiklock pointed out, that "the way to a crowd is not through reason but through emotion." But is it also true that action should rest only upon reason? There are times when the crowd, moved by what it feels, is undoubtedly right. Can it be said that the attitude of British people towards the Monarchy—an attitude revealed very plainly in the past few weeks—is based on reason? Political thinkers can explain, though not always without difficulty, the way in which the person of a king and the pageantry through which he moves are able to give people a sense of history. The continuity of national experience is embodied for them in a royal figure whose line of descent can be traced unbroken through the centuries. Beyond this sentiment are constitutional functions and values, but these are

doubtfully understood by crowds who stand in the streets for a solemn occasion. Nevertheless, in this instance the crowd is wiser, with an unconscious wisdom, than an individual who knows the history and theory of constitutional monarchy, but who feels no loyalty.

Dr. Blaiklock probably intended a distinction to be made between a crowd and a mob. Psychologists have described and have attempted to explain the infection of hate or violence which can drive men to deeds they are later unwilling to remember. A mob may even seem to take a life of its own, as if its members had surrendered to a corporate will. At such moments the most rational man has to fight hard for individuality. These occasions are warnings of what could happen if emotion were the sole guide to action, but they do not prove that men should live by reason alone. It is doubtful, indeed, if the life of reason is more than a philosopher's dream. Men like Bernard Shaw have revealed with merciless logic the oddness of our social behaviour; and sometimes they have been surprised because errors, uncovered and ridiculed, were not immediately corrected. The truth seems to be that all men—the brilliant as well as the dull—feel much more than they think; and their thinking is often a rationalisation of what has been felt. Yet it is also true that emotion is most valuable and least dangerous when it is under control. This is a function of reason: to give feeling the restraint and guidance which can turn it towards proper ends. Education must be concerned with feeling as well as with reason. Its task, a hard one, is to reach the necessary balance.

N.Z. LISTENER, FEBRUARY 29, 1952.