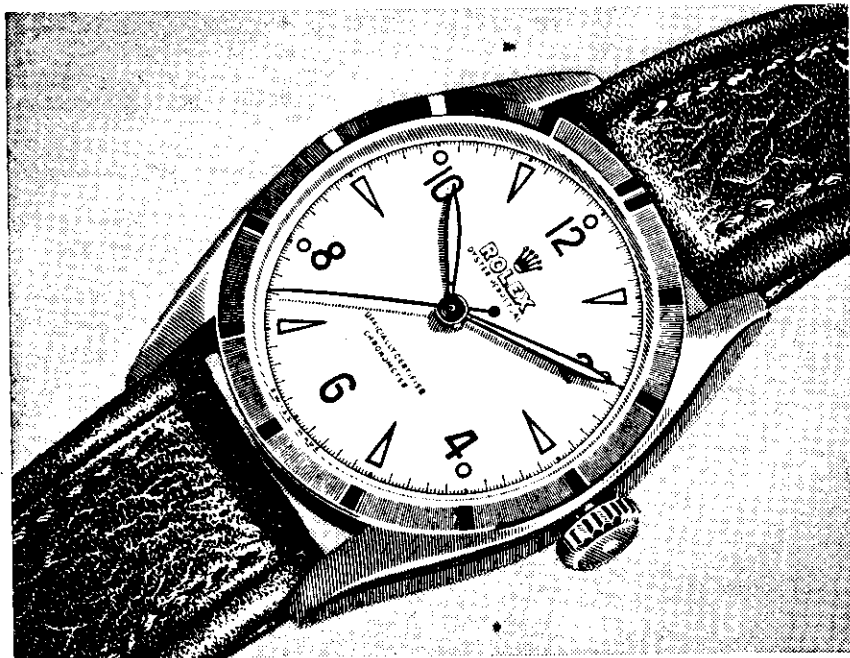


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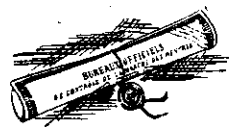
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The Attraction of France

A SERIES of talks to be given from 3YA can be described as a venture in international understanding. In *Our Debt to France*, announced on page 7, efforts have been made to deepen our knowledge of another people by showing how often its ways of thinking and living have influenced our own. The process began a long time ago with the assimilation of words into ordinary speech after the Norman Conquest, and it has continued ever since in war and peace—a traffic of the arts, of science and commerce, and fashion. Much that has been drawn into English culture has been transmitted to other countries, including our own. There is, of course, a traffic in the opposite direction. And it is always interesting to see where the influence breaks down, or where it clashes with intractable elements in the English character.

The French continue to export new ideas in costume, but they cannot pass on the talent for wearing clothes which is perhaps the secret of their pre-eminence in fashion. Only women who can wear the simplest things with an air which conceals infallible taste can be expected to move safely among innovations. French women have no inhibitions about clothes, whereas in England—where the prevailing outlook is somewhat masculine—women's fashions remain conservative. These differences can be explained too simply; it may be wiser merely to mention them. Similarly, the French attitude towards food and drink is like certain wines in that it does not travel well. Many British people enjoy the long and leisurely meals when they can afford to go to Paris. They respect the treatment of cooking as an art; they are pleased by the separation of foods which at home might be brought together in an outrageous mingling of flavours; and they delight in the delicate mating of food and

wine. Back in their own countries, however, they fall again into the old habits. Food is cooked without reverence, and is eaten hastily; and good wine is too dear to be bought by the plain man except for special occasions. Even if there were no economic discouragement, it is doubtful if Britons would adopt French methods and manners. The general feeling about pleasures of the flesh appears to be that they are somehow not quite respectable. In France there is no difficulty in conforming, but at home another sort of conformity is made inescapable by the facts of trade and currency and the stern morality of licensing.

Nevertheless, the French way of life remains interesting to us; even those who dislike it seem to feel the attraction, for they cannot leave it alone. Many of the notions which have got abroad are sentimental or exaggerated. Frenchmen are not merely people who sit for two or three hours over a meal. Their interests are by no means confined to food and wine and fashion. The loveliest city in the world did not rise overnight in a haze of splendid buildings and boulevards. A noble literature was not created by men who dreamed of performance in lazy hours in the cafes. Napoleon did not overrun Europe with effeminate soldiers. And the incisive French mind, if not always as logical as it is supposed to be, could hardly be the product of over-indulged appetites. The world would have no magic if all men had the same habits and beliefs. Civilisation grows through an interaction of diverse cultures. France's contributions to western art and thought, and to the graces of living, are beyond assessment. It is no accident or convention of travel, but a deep attraction, which draws men to Paris and to the simpler life of the provinces. When we go there we are changed a little, and thereafter we never quite cease to hope that some day we shall be able to return.

N.Z. LISTENER, MARCH 21, 1952