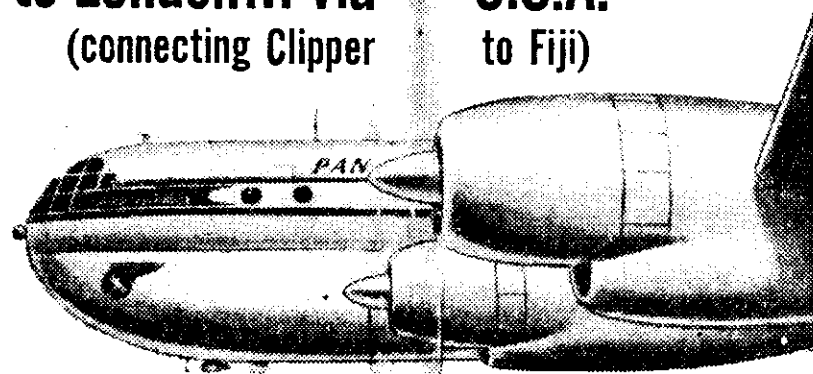


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Indecency in Literature

THE work of the Advisory Committee on Importation of Books, described on page 6, should help to remove anomalies and weaknesses of censorship in New Zealand. It is clear from what has been said by the chairman, Professor I. A. Gordon, that the committee's approach to a delicate task is liberal. We do not mean "liberal" in any sense of a misused word which could imply an easy tolerance. The committee has to keep within its order of reference; but in doing so it cannot fail to be aware of wider responsibilities. There is, perhaps, no exact and final definition of indecency in literature. The law can say that certain actions are indecent, and it gives a necessary protection from insult and violence. Actions have intention and consequences, often unmistakable. But how are we to judge the potential harmfulness of behaviour which exists only in description?

There are some obvious safeguards. The case histories of psychiatrists have details which might be revolting to laymen; but they are valuable aids to clinical treatment, and are printed in books for academic or professional readers. Similarly, medical text books may have illustrations offensive to the wrong sort of reader, though it is not easy to be patient with people who are affronted by honest portrayals of the human body. With books of these kinds, however, there can be little difficulty. They are published for good reasons, and are read mainly by those for whom they are intended. The censor's task becomes harder when he has to turn to imaginative writing. Yet even here he is not without precedents. Attempts to suppress classics can be defeated by appealing to principles which have been upheld in the Supreme Court. A section of the Indecent Publications Act says explicitly that literary value must be considered. Great novels and plays have passages which might seem shocking to people who read

them outside their context. Within the framework and in the spirit of the story or play, they are without offence. Further, people who go to these books may be supposed to have reached adult standards in reading. For them, the bawdiness is incidental, or—as in some of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*—is inseparable from the poetry and its background in social history. The casual reader will not persevere very long with books in which the "indecent" passages are concealed in what to him would seem an encompassing dullness.

Hardest of all, however, is judgment of contemporary fiction. Much of it is written with extreme frankness, though not necessarily with more freedom or licence than was taken by writers who are now classics. It is true that the coarseness of Rabelais, which could be tolerated in the 16th Century, would be mere vulgarity in an age with different social standards. The wish to shock, sometimes noticeable in present-day writing, is a juvenile impulse which indicates arrested development. But a frank treatment of sexual experience is also found in the work of first-class novelists. Their intention is artistic, not pornographic; and although they are a long way from Chaucerian times and outlook, we need to remember that they are working in a century which has brought much new knowledge. Novelists have been deeply influenced by anthropology and psychoanalysis. In writing of themes taken from new concepts of behaviour, they are reaching towards the truth as artists see it. Some of them will be classics in the future; many others will be forgotten. It is outside the competence of any committee to anticipate the verdicts of posterity. Indecency written down for its own sake is easily recognised; but often there is a narrow margin between what is true, and should be said, and what is merely salacious. At such times we must be guided by principles which protect literature as well as society.

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 21, 1953.