

BBC's Listener Research Expert Visits N.Z.

WHAT makes a good radio programme? This simple question has puzzled some of Britain's leading researchers over the past 20 years. Dr. Philip E. Vernon, Professor of Educational Psychology at London University, who is visiting this country at the invitation of the New Zealand branch of the British Psychological Society, has been in charge of much of the research work for the BBC. Last week in an interview with *The Listener* he discussed what had been done.

"Audience or listener research has been carried on for many years," he said, "in order to get some more reliable guide to the value of radio sessions than is provided by fan mail. To estimate the appeal of its programmes, the BBC interviews 1500 people as a sample every day. To determine the quality of programmes a panel of listeners fill in regular questionnaires analysing what they have got out of different broadcasts. From these reports the BBC makes up a Thermometer of Listening, on which a popular programme might score as much as 70 per cent, and a weak one only 30 per cent."

"From January to May of 1950 I was in charge of a project to investigate the intelligibility of talks broadcast to members of the armed forces," Dr. Vernon said. "The talks dealt with such subjects of current affairs, English literature, science and music. The scheme, which was the first of its kind to be carried out, assessed not only the value of the talks to listeners, but also the ability of talks producers to judge what was a good talk. The listeners first said whether the talk was easy or difficult to understand, secondly whether it was interesting or dull, and thirdly, they wrote down in their own words what they could remember of the main points of the talk."

"The results showed that little of an average broadcast talk gets across, except to listeners who have had some secondary education or who are of superior intelligence."

On the whole, the most successful talks dealt with concrete subjects of a practical kind, which affected listeners in their daily lives, he said. The least successful dealt with subjects such as literature which reminded listeners of their schooldays, or with very abstract topics such as how to think clearly. Politics, economics and the like didn't get across well unless, like the Budget or national defence, they had obvious personal relevance. Travel and geography, including descriptions of interesting places and living people, were likely to be more interesting than historical subjects.

"Good or poor delivery has remarkably little effect on intelligibility," he

added. "But distracting dialects, lack of clarity, monotony and other defects often strike listeners as unpleasant and difficult to follow. Too speedy a delivery is even more upsetting."

The length of a talk is important, in Dr. Vernon's opinion. After 15 minutes concentration begins to fail. With a 30-minute talk the average or even intelligent listener doesn't remember clearly what was contained in the last 15 minutes, and his memory of the first 15 minutes is affected also by the additional length.

Dramatised illustrations in a talk helped retention, and a listener would in such cases remember more a week later than he had from a straight talk. Often, however, listeners remembered the illustration without connecting it with the idea behind it. In one talk a dramatic illustration from Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, involving some witty talk about Algernon's cigarette case, was clearly remembered by listeners who had forgotten, however, what the incident was intended to em-

phasise—the use of wit and humour in English literature.

"The great bulk of ordinary listeners are not much interested in talks of an educational or informational character," Dr. Vernon said. "This is shown by the low listening percentages reported by BBC Audience Research. Many talks are written at too advanced a level, by experts who scarcely realise the limited capacities or interests of the average listener."

The BBC's Listener Research unit, he went on, was at present concentrating on finding out beforehand the attitudes and knowledge of listeners to subjects for projected talks, such as, for instance, a series on race relations in South Africa. Simple tests and ques-

tionnaires posted out to listeners were used as a guide by producers in preparing their talks. In this way talks could be designed to meet wider audience.

Dr. Vernon, who is psychological research adviser to the armed forces and the Civil Service Commission in Britain, has recorded a series of four talks for the NZBS on industrial psychology. These talks, under the general title of *Psychology and Careers*, deal with "The Backward Child in School," "The School-leaver and his Job," "Intelligence Tests," and "Making Appointments." Mrs. Vernon, who is accompanying Dr. Vernon on his visit and who is herself a psychologist and teacher, will take part in a discussion which will be broadcast in 1YA's *Feminine Viewpoint* programme at 10.30 a.m., on Wednesday, October 7, and from 2YA, 3YA and 4YA on succeeding Wednesdays.



N.P.S. photograph

PROFESSOR PHILIP E. VERNON

"The least successful talks dealt with subjects which reminded listeners of their schooldays"

Poor Man's Earl

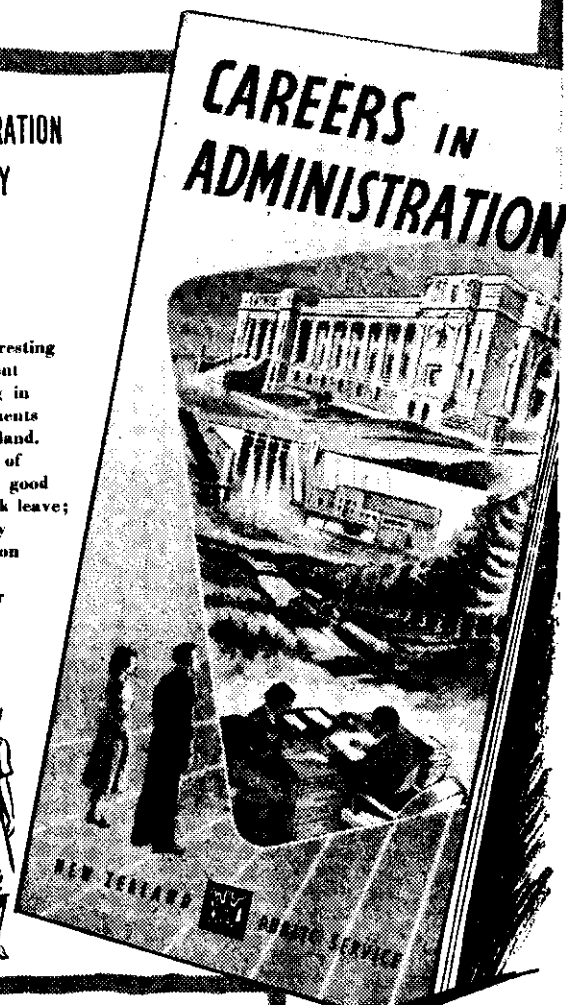
"MY Lords," said the Duke of Argyll to his peers in the House, "the social reforms of the last century have not been due mainly to the Liberal Party, or to any party. They have been due mainly to the influence, character and perseverance of one man." The man was Lord Shaftesbury, who did more than anyone of his age to improve conditions of the low-born. It was perhaps appropriate that when a grateful people erected a monument to him it should be a statue of Eros, God of Love. But during the time he was fighting on behalf of the people—especially the children—who toiled and died in the factories and mines and the chimneys of England the gratitude was often not so apparent. The story of Shaftesbury's career as a reformer is the theme of *The Poor Man's Earl*, a dramatised programme to be broadcast from 1YC at 7.44 p.m. on September 20. The story was written by Cyril Roberts and produced by the NZBS.

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