

## COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

### MR. PUNCH'S POLITICAL SUPPLEMENTS.

Mr. Leonard Woolf's useful pamphlet, *Hunting the Highbrow* (Hogarth Press) needs bringing up to date ; for the facetious denigration of art and the snarls of the vulgar (when discomforted) are now common in journals with a higher conventional reputation than the *Daily Express*. It is not enough, for instance, to dismiss *Punch* as merely dull and reactionary. Reactionary it always was, after its first twenty years ; from its support of the pro-slavery South to its behaviour in the war, when (as the introduction to the recent *Punch* anthology informs us) it 'never served its country better than . . . between the years 1914 and 1918,' i.e. by heightening the country's fighting temper and by assiduously pumping the stimulus of indignation, horror and hatred into the public mind (See Lord Ponsonby's *Falsehood in Wartime*, Allen and Unwin, 2/6d.). But the younger *Punch* evinced a genuine comedic attitude and represented a social poise ; there might then be applied to it the now meaningless comparison with Aristophanes. *Punch* to-day exemplifies a modern tendency—the capitalizing of complacency, ignorance and irresponsibility by the complacent, ignorant and irresponsible. Its humour, for instance, is frequently 'anti-highbrow' ; my three copies yield two gibes at Epstein, and two cartoons depreciating artists. The best analysis of the attitude comes from the *New Statesman* of March 28th, 1931, in a valuable essay, *The Artist and the Gentleman* ; it is reprinted in *Fleet Street*, a recent anthology of journalism, which is otherwise only useful for laboratory purposes. 'How inferior are the conceptions of "gentleman" and "artist" in daily use may be perfectly seen from Mr. A. P. Herbert's *Tantivy Towers*, in which we have both reduced to their lowest common measure as

mere egoists, and this is exactly how they appear to-day in the eyes of the majority of readers of *Punch*, which caters so cleverly for this emotionally uneducated public.'

This *Punch* anthology (compiled by Guy Boas, Macmillan) is a document of some anthropological interest, for it conveniently delineates the ideal reader of *Punch*. He is evidently a cat-, dog-, child- and mule-lover, who has derived from his public school those qualities which the silk-stockings makers desiderate when they advertise for representatives—'Public school type preferred'—in short, a gentleman of the type described by Mr. Turner, 'a half-wit who gapes at the mention of philosophy or music or poetry, who thinks it bad form even to take cricket seriously, as the Australians, for example, take it, and who grumbled at the Germans attempting to win the war by gas when he was only attempting to win it by guns and bayonets.' The humour is below the level of adult response, consisting largely of adolescent verbalisms and circumlocutions, like the advertisements for bottled salt-and-beef. At least two of the items are repeated in a slightly varied form, for the kinds of appeal made run to type as the stock response is constantly tapped. And the emotional plane on which *Punch* works was beautifully illustrated by this Observation from a Sunday puff: '*Punch* has never forgotten that a comic poet should first of all be a poet. There are some lines of authentic loveliness among the jests of this anthology . . . (which) . . . remind one that *Punch* is an organ of taste and not just a receptacle for jokes.' The synthetic efforts at seriousness are even more betraying than the humour; those verses, instinct with nobility and strongly tainted with Kipling, indicate that *Punch* humour is the complement of a certain vicious type of the patriotic-domestic sentimentality. Some who accept this account may object that it is not worth mentioning here; but it seems necessary because *Punch* is a formative influence—a case might be made out for its exclusion from educational establishments. And they will agree that the spread of the *Punch* attitude to respectable journals is a sinister development.

It is not easy now to realize that in the 19th century we had a responsible press. Governments consulted the best papers, and the provincial sheets copied them, so that enlightened opinion radiated downward and outward; it is said that in the nineties

the working man followed politics as he now pursues sport and manhunting. The diffusion of 'the best that is known and thought in the world' was not impossible, as it seems to-day, now that 'the free play of the mind upon every subject which it touches' is hard to seek in the press. *Fiction and the Reading Public* recorded the growth of 'a whole *Punch* literature,' and consonant with it we have a journalism exhibiting the same 'anti-highbrow' animus. We all know those weekly essays by the modern Lambs, whose lowbrow propaganda for their flocks is excelled in subtlety only by the genteel tobacco and tailoring advertisements, for copy- and essay-writer inculcate the same ethos; and in criticism one form of the attitude is the clever depreciation of established figures (e.g. D. H. Lawrence) who did not ask leave to be great. A specimen passage, approvingly quoted in a Sunday paper: 'It must be a pure act of faith for anybody to believe that human beings are the better for having access either to Nature or to the arts.' That some of these papers print responsible comments on politics does not relieve their total anæmia; politics are not an autotelic activity, and by neglecting the ends without which politics are so much ludo, the enlightened section of our press seems merely to be playing football with its own head.

If to particularize one mentions the *New Statesman*, it is because one would like to pay a personal debt to it, for its influence in forming a critical habit. It has been and (more likely than any other) may yet be, a valuable journal; and one still accords it a pious but unconfident recommendation. Except as evidence, and for teaching in school what criticism isn't, its literary side is negligible: the latest intelligent review of poetry was in the funeral number of the *Nation*, February 21st, 1931, though an adequate placing of a best-selling novelist occurs about every six months, ten years too late. With monotonous regularity it is taken in by book-club currency; and one fears, at times, that it is catering for, and hence forming, the kind of taste so adequately described in the essay already quoted from its pages. It is significant that Mr. Wodehouse's publisher finds it a worthwhile paper to advertise in, and that there recently appeared an advertisement from a *Punch* reader who wished to exchange papers with a reader of the *New Statesman*. Except for 'Critic's' column, topical articles of value are so rare (on patent medicines about a

year ago, and more recently on a revivalist movement) as to be individually memorable; normally they are far below the level of the *New Republic*, which has of course more space for such contributions, as it does not insult its readers with puzzles, weekly essays, sports reports or motoring columns. (And if it did print a motoring column, it would be one that would really help a prospective purchaser—the *New Republic* is associated with Consumers' Research). Except for occasional lapses into sentimentality against British imperialism, the *New Republic* is an exemplar of what a journal of opinion should be; it provides instruction how to resist civilization. (See 'A Middleman of Ideas' in *Scrutiny* No. 1). Its journalistic 'debunking' is excellent—pertinent, and not merely bright—and its literary criticism deserves the name; it is never fooled by the substitute literature (Wilder, Wells, Hemingway and the saga-makers) for which English reviewers fall so gullibly. Nor does it strain after a spurious vitality by putting its personality across at get-together dinners for puzzle-solvers, to establish a flank-rubbing *camaraderie*—a process known to sales executives as 'The Speciality Appeal to Instinct,' or 'The Personal Touch in Advertising.' About the *Manchester Guardian* one would make the same comments and regrets as for the *New Statesman*, it too yields specimens of the higher Beachcombing.

The function of 'pulling out a few more stops in that powerful but at present narrow-toned organ, the modern Englishman' was never more needed, and a critical journal which took its responsibilities seriously would command respect and possibly circulation. As it is, the innocent are corrupted and the wrong stops pulled out, and 'our more elegant weeklies' will soon be no more than political supplements to *Punch*.

DENYS THOMPSON.

### TRAINING COLLEGES: REPERCUSSIONS

The scrutiny of Training Colleges published in our December issue produced a large number of letters to the Editors, but has not, so far, provoked the more complete investigation we innocently hoped for, or, indeed, any comment at all from any of the educational journals. Significantly, it is reported that at a meeting of Principals where the article was discussed, it was decided that there was no need to read it since 'outside' criticism could not possibly have any bearings on their particular problems. But the letters which we have received—almost all from lecturers in Training Colleges—would show, if they could be printed in full, that our case against the normal Training College system was completely justified.

Objections can be summarised under two heads: (a) that we did not know what we were talking about, and (b) that lecturers were doing their best and that it was rather ungentlemanly to mention the unavoidable defects of the present system. As for (a), a single quotation must suffice: 'I have no evidence that your questionnaire reached this college, and I cannot refrain from letting you know of the complete agreement with your criticisms of all of my colleagues who have seen the article.' We may say, for the benefit of those who complained that our survey was not 'scientifically conducted,' that the extract is representative.

We are tempted to go on quoting from the letters of those who confirm our case in detail and who comment on other aspects of the educational system, but we must reserve the mass of fresh material received, the fresh problems raised, to be dealt with in later numbers of *Scrutiny*. The objections under (b) do not seem to need an answer.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, what is to be done? 'Bad as things are,' writes a correspondent (a university lecturer), 'I hope you will not be

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<sup>1</sup>We have to acknowledge a report on 'Professional Courses in the Training of Teachers' by Miss Margaret Phillips (*British Journal of Educational Psychology*, November, 1931, February, 1932) sent us by the author. Much of the evidence confirms our own; but the credit side of the Training College account is given in terms too general to be impressive. As evidence for the statement that 'For many women the Psychology course is the most important