

NATURE

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CONTENTS

	Page
Functions of the Press	247
The Village Dormitory. By Prof. J. H. Hutton, C.I.E.	249
Mid-Victorian Metaphysics. By F. I. G. Rawlins	250
Tropical Agriculture. By Dr. E. C. Humphries	251
Oceanic Birds of South America. By Seton Gordon, C.B.E.	251
Crystals and X-Rays. By Prof. J. M. Robertson, F.R.S.	252
Effect of Low Temperature on the Absorption Spectra of Hæmo- proteins; with Observations on the Absorption Spectrum of Oxygen. By Prof. D. Keilin, F.R.S., and Dr. E. F. Hartree	254
Some Observations on the Mode of Action of Penicillin. By Peter Mitchell	259
Symbols and Nomenclature. By Sir Charles Darwin, K.B.E., F.R.S. Research Laboratories of the General Electric Company	262
Obituaries:	
Mrs. R. H. A. Plimmer. By Dr. Katharine H. Coward	265
Mr. F. S. Smythe. By N. E. Odell	266
News and Views	266
Letters to the Editors:	
Effect of X-Rays on the Incorporation of Carbon-14 into Animal Tissue.—Prof. G. Hevesy, For.Mem.R.S.	269
A Sympatholytic (Adrenergic Blocking) Substance (Dibenzyl- β-Chloroethyl Ethyl Ammonium Bromide) with Rapid Action and High Activity in Animal Experiments.—Dr. Ebbe Nyman Self-Regulation of the Muscle Contraction by Facilitation and Inhibition from its Proprioceptors.—Prof. Ragnar Granit and V. Suursoo	270
Origin and Site of Formation of Fructose in the Foetal Sheep. —Prof. A. St. G. Huggett, Dr. F. L. Warren and Mrs. V. N. Winterton	271
Changes in Serum-Protein Levels in Rabbits Treated with 1 : 2 : 5 : 6 Dibenzanthracene.—Dr. J. L. Williams and R. Stansfield	272
Drug Action of Formaldehyde Derivatives of Sulphathiazole.— Prof. S. S. Bhatnagar and F. Fernandes	272
Molybdenum and Sulphur in Symbiotic Nitrogen Fixation.— A. J. Anderson and D. Spencer	273
Association of <i>Gonatorrhodiella Highlei</i> with <i>Nectria</i> Species. —W. Blyth	274
Death of Sycamore Trees Associated with an Unidentified Fungus.—Dr. P. H. Gregory, T. R. Pearce and S. Waller	275
Fluorescence of Soil Constituents in Ultra-violet Light.—P. H. Gallagher	275
Control of a Beam of Electrons by an Intersecting Electron Beam.—Dr. J. L. H. Jonker and A. J. W. M. van Overbeek	276
Creation and Growth of Superconducting Nuclei.—T. E. Faber Beta Decay of Thulium-170.—R. L. Graham and D. H. Tomlin Cosmical Zero, and the Origin of Radiation and Dense Matter. —D. Stanley-Jones	277
Solar Flares and the Zeeman Effect.—Chas. E. R. Bruce; Dr. M. A. Ellison	280
Atmospheric Oscillations.—Dr. M. V. Wilkes	281
Reciprocity Theory of Electrodynamics.—Prof. Max Born, F.R.S., K. C. Cheng and Dr. H. S. Green	281
Calculation of Factorial Moments of Certain Probability Dis- tributions.—Dr. P. V. Krishna Iyer	282
The Word 'International'.—Sir John Myres, O.B.E.	282
A New Ion Source for Mass Spectrometry.—Dr. G. P. Barnard	283
Production of Heavy Mesons in Cosmic Ray Stars. By J. B. Harding and Dr. D. H. Perkins	285
Annual Report of the Forestry Commissioners	287
New South Wales University of Technology: New Appointments New Seismic Station at Galerazamba, Colombia. By the Rev. J. E. Ramirez, S.J.	287
Copying from Journals of Scientific Papers	288

FUNCTIONS OF THE PRESS ⁵⁷⁶

THE report of the Royal Commission on the Press, 1947-49*, set up as the outcome of a division in the House of Commons on October 29, 1946, contains little that was not forecast in the course of the debate preceding that division. The wild charges against the British Press are plainly refuted. "There is nothing approaching monopoly in the Press as a whole or, with the single exception of the London financial daily, in any class of newspaper; nor is there in those classes of periodical which the Commission examined." Likewise, the Commission concludes that the present degree of concentration of ownership in the newspaper Press as a whole or in any important class of it is not so great as to prejudice the free expression of opinion or the accurate presentation of news, or to be contrary to the best interests of the public.

Nevertheless, the Commission is severely critical of the Press, and although it exonerates the British Press from subordination to personal interest and outside pressure and says plainly that the causes of the shortcomings emphasized in the report do not lie in any particular form of ownership, the Commission's findings justify complacency neither on the part of the Press nor of the public—nor, it might be added, on the part of the Government which appointed the Commission. The Commission finds, indeed, that the British Press is inferior to none in the world, that it is free from corruption, completely independent of outside financial interests and that there are no monopolistic tendencies. Most of the quality papers meet the Commission's first requirement that, while the selection of news may be affected by a newspaper's political and other opinions, the news it reports should be reported truthfully and without excessive bias. All the popular papers and some of the quality papers fail to meet this requirement, either through excessive partisanship or through distortion in the interest of news value, or both.

The Commission's second requirement is that the number and variety of newspapers should be such that the Press as a whole gives an opportunity for all important points of view to be presented effectively in terms of the varying standards of taste, education and political opinion. The Commission considers that the Press does provide adequately for a sufficient variety of political opinion but not for a sufficient variety of intellectual levels. The gap between the best of the quality papers and the general run of the popular Press is too wide, and the number of papers of an intermediate type is too small. There is a lack of newspapers which are more serious and better balanced than the popular papers but more varied and easier to read than the quality.

Fundamentally this position is due, as the report emphasizes, to the increasing complexity of public affairs and the growth of the reading public creating a need for public instruction on an entirely new scale without producing, as yet, either the corresponding demand or the corresponding supply. The Commission

* Royal Commission on the Press, 1947-1949. Report. (Cmd. 7700.) Pp. v+363. (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1949.) 6s. net.

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recognizes, indeed, that a newspaper cannot raise its standard far above that of its public and may profit by lowering its standard to gain an advantage over a competitor. This tendency is not always resisted as firmly as the public interest requires. When the Commission continues: "The Press does not do all it might to encourage its public to accept or demand material of high quality", the man of science might be tempted to add that many newspapers are not appreciative of efforts to raise the standard of reporting of scientific and technical matters.

The Press has nevertheless considerable achievements to its credit. "It provides cheaply and efficiently a mass of information and entertainment for which there is a wide demand. It acknowledges high standards of public responsibility and service. It is jealous of its own independence and reputation and many of those employed in it have a sense of vocation."

For such reasons the Commission wisely rejects the idea of any major changes in the ownership and control of the industry, including State control. "Free enterprise is a prerequisite of a free Press, and free enterprise in the case of newspapers of any considerable circulation will generally mean commercially profitable enterprise." It seeks instead the means of maintaining the free expression of opinion and the greatest practicable accuracy in the presentation of news, and, generally, a proper relationship between the Press and society, primarily in the Press itself. For this purpose it recommends that the Press itself should establish a General Council of the Press, with a lay representation of about twenty per cent, including the chairman, nominated jointly by the Lord Chief Justice and the Lord President of the Court of Session, with the object of safeguarding the freedom of the Press, and encouraging the growth of a sense of public responsibility and public service among all engaged in the profession of journalism.

This proposal represents such a departure from the usual form of professional body responsible for the maintenance of high professional standards that it is not surprising that it has had rather a mixed reception, nor does it appear very clear from the report what such a Council could achieve. In the debate in the House of Commons on July 28, Mr. Herbert Morrison said that the Government hoped to see the Commission's recommendations on this issue voluntarily put into effect by the Press itself. In the event of this not being done the Government would then look closely into the matter. In replying, Mr. Oliver Stanley preferred to leave the question entirely in the hands of the Press and doubted if a statutory body set up in defiance of the wishes of the Press would have any chance of success.

The Commission attributes some of the shortcomings of the Press very largely to an inadequate standard of education in the profession of journalism. There will be some men of science who will endorse the opinion of the Commission that the standards of education prevailing generally in the profession are not high enough to enable it to deal adequately with the increasing complexity of the events and the background which the modern journalist must interpret

and report. The improvement of professional standards is essentially a matter for the profession of journalism itself, whether or not the suggested Council can play a useful part. So far, however, as public opinion affects Press standards, that is a matter of education in which the raising of the school-leaving age may ultimately have a beneficial effect. No doubt, educational policy as pursued by the Minister of Education may also contribute to that end; but there is another sphere in which Government policy can have an even more direct influence.

In a chapter on external influences, the Commission examined evidence regarding the effect of Government Information Services without finding any support for the view that any harmful influence was yet being exerted on the Press by such services, although there would be danger if newspapers came to rely on taking all or most of their news unquestioningly from a Government department. The outstanding impression left by the whole report, however, is that the main factor responsible for the shortcomings of the Press during the past ten years is the shortage of newsprint. "The most striking fact about the Press at the present moment, and from the point of view of our inquiry one of the most significant, is the persistence for the last ten years of an acute shortage of newsprint. . . . The reduction to four or five pages of newspapers which before the war averaged over 20 means that much important material cannot be published and that what is published must be highly compressed. Much news must be 'suppressed' for this reason alone and severe compression makes inaccuracy and distortion more difficult to avoid. The likelihood that the Press will be the subject of complaints is increased."

While it does not overstress the importance of this factor, admitting that an increased supply of newsprint would merely remove one of the impediments in the way of improving the Press, the Commission returns repeatedly to this point in its report, and it brings out plainly that the present position is mainly a Government responsibility. In reference to the reduction in supplies of newsprint in July 1947, the Commission endorses the view that this decision of the Government endangered the primary liberty of free discussion which depends on access to adequate information. The continued shortage of newsprint deprives the public of news and information and the stimulus of a free and copious discussion of all topics of current interest. The British public is becoming ill-informed, and, having regard to British responsibilities abroad and British problems at home, it should be a major political and social responsibility of the Government to put the Press in a position to discharge adequately its full normal functions.

In stressing, therefore, the importance of securing at the earliest possible date an adequate supply of newsprint, the Commission points out that it is also important that newsprint should be made available for the establishment of new papers. It expresses no opinion as to what priority should be given to the import of newsprint or pulp in relation to other scarce materials, or how the available newsprint should be allocated, but it would welcome any

increase in supplies which may be compatible with the economic position of the country. Nor could it well be made plainer that a main responsibility for present deficiencies in the British Press must rest with the Government; and in the debate on July 28 Mr. Morrison dealt in only brief and vague terms with the question of newsprint supplies.

Much more might, indeed, be said on that point if a Royal Commission could scarcely have said it. The hasty and ill-judged ban on the prohibition of publication of technical periodicals in the spring of 1947 may not have been prompted by a desire to suppress or hinder informed criticism; nevertheless there has been displayed too often impatience or resentment of such criticism or comment to dispel the impression that the Government has not been sorry to have any excuse for putting difficulties in the way of public discussion, and there has been no action which suggests that the Government is alive, as the Royal Commission is, to the danger in the world to-day of the British public being ill-informed on world or home affairs. Moreover, besides the vital part which the Press has to play in the formation of sound judgments on public affairs, the increasing concentration of power in the hands of the Government enhances the importance of the Press as a watchdog over personal liberties. The free expression of ideas must not be imperilled for the sake of saving a few dollars by the reduction in pulp supplies.

It is imperative in a world where totalitarianism is rife in many different guises that the public should be on guard against any encroachment of the traditional freedom of the British Press, whether it be by the development of powerful private monopolies or by unwarranted State interference. In this respect the responsibility for vigilance probably lies more with the general public than with those actively engaged in the publishing of news. The Commission has already criticized the level of taste shown by the public in its appreciation of newspapers, and thus the Press cannot be completely blamed for pandering to such taste. In the same way, though the Press should be the first champions of civil liberties, it is the people themselves who must safeguard their own freedom of the written word.

203

THE VILLAGE DORMITORY

The Muria and their *Ghotul*

By Verrier Elwin. Pp. xxix+730+151 plates. (London: Oxford University Press, 1947.) 42s. net.

DR. VERRIER ELWIN'S very substantial volume does not profess to be a study of Muria culture as a whole, but it is, in fact, an exhaustive monograph on the Muria Gond tribe of Bastar State in east central India, approached, and very advantageously indeed, through the medium of one of their most individual institutions, that of the *ghotul*. The *ghotul* is the young people's dormitory; but its use is not restricted, as in so many tribes (for this institution is very widespread), to males only. Among the Muria, children of both sexes start sleeping in the *ghotul* at an early age, and they are

not segregated there. There seem to be two types of *ghotul*, one in which each individual has his or her allotted partner to whom fidelity is due during the continuance of life in the *ghotul*, which lasts until marriage; in the other type, permanent or semi-permanent attachment to an individual is banned, and though some of the officers of the institution may have quasi-permanent partners, the sleeping partners of the rank and file are decided for them and varied systematically every few days. Elwin regards this type as a modern variation from the one in which partnerships are expected to be continuing, but it seems possible to the reviewer that it is more likely to be a partial reversion to the less regulated promiscuity of an older pattern which had been changed gradually into the type with permanent partnerships.

In any event, the life of the inmates is described by Elwin with very great detail; he pictures an almost idyllic existence from which jealousy and fear and passion are banished, in which selfishness is excoriated and prostitution unknown, and where the young men and damsels of the tribe ('maidens' would scarcely be the appropriate word) live together in an atmosphere of communal and cousinly, though far from platonic, love. It is true that there are passages which suggest that the old Adam shows itself from time to time; but on the whole the author makes a really good case for the overriding beneficent value of the institution to the Muria tribe, and the essentially moral influence of the *ghotul* in Muria life.

Seeing that it is the most important of tribal institutions, the *ghotul* is properly used as a means of approach to Muria culture generally. The seventeen chapters in Part 2 of the book are nominally all concerned with some aspect of the *ghotul*, but include a very detailed account of songs, dances, games and recreations, and a chapter on marriage, and one on dreams, which theoretically are not experienced at all when sleeping in a *ghotul*. Part 1 contains eight chapters on the culture of the Muria in general, an arrangement which inevitably involves a certain amount of repetition. They deal with the general pattern of Muria life. Starting with the geographical environment and the historical background, some account is given of the Murias' relations with the surrounding tribes, and the remainder of Part 1 deals with the livelihood, clan system, *rites de passage* and religion of the Murias, and the legend of the god, or culture-hero, Lingo. Among other points are the absence of any obvious initiation ceremony, the tattooing, which, as among the Assam hill-tribes, is done by women, the erection of monoliths in honour of the dead, and the association of the dead with the fertility of the soil. These are features for which there are many parallels; but the Anga is a godling peculiar to the Muria. He is a sort of recumbent idol, made from a tree and informed with the lives of the old men who, having made him, soon die. He has to be carried on a sort of frame by four men, and when so carried acts as a sort of oracle controlling the course and behaviour of the bearers to indicate his will. The corpse of a dead man carried on a bier is similarly used as a means of divination.

Part 2 starts with a long chapter (fifty-six pages) on the origin of the *ghotul*. This chapter, which contains substantial quotations from a number of authors as well as illustrations which, however fine, are by no means strictly relevant to the Muria *ghotul*, would have been better published separately in an expanded form. The volume is more than long enough without