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Television Won't Kill Books

WHAT is television doing to writers, to the reading of books and the world of literature? Is it a threat to writers? Does it mean that fewer books are being bought and read? Is it a blight on the future of literature?

When I began writing, in what were called for some odd reason the gay twenties, the life of a writer was not a particularly difficult one. On the other hand it was not a particularly affluent one, unless he happened to be Walpole or Maugham, Galsworthy or Wells.

The chief reason for this, and perhaps a surprising one to a present-day reader is that books, on the whole, did not sell many copies. The average sale of a novel was probably a good deal less than 3,000 copies; often it was under 1,000.

A war book, a travel book, an important book of political memoirs, or some special tit-bit like "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," might sell many more. But if in the ordinary run of business a publisher put out a book selling 10,000 copies he welcomed it with the wildest celebration.

Whenever an established art or a settled mode of life is assailed by a new invention, you may be sure that the Jeremiahs will lift immediately their voices in dismal dirge. The arrival of television, which embraces so many of the artificial features of radio and film but which has more flexible qualities they do not share, is no exception.

Still on the Map

IT is really not necessary to examine here whether music and musicians, drama and actors, have been exterminated during the last 30 years; clearly the opposite is true. Let us look merely at books and literature.

In the first five months of 1953, television's greatest year, a year of wholly magnificent distractions, the book trade's turnover was rather more than £32m. This was about £2m. higher than the corresponding period for 1952.

Such a figure can, of course, be misleading. But the book trade can hardly be said to have been hounded off the map. It is quite certain, too, that the average individual sales of books have been increasing enormously during the last quarter of a century.

Thirty years ago I doubt if a book like "Seven Years in Tibet" would have sold 10,000 copies. To-day it is probably nearer 100,000.

The same is true of good music. Mr. Gerald Moore, for example, recently declared that the musical life of London is greater than that of any capital city in the world—and that is after 50 years of competition by its first alleged enemy, the film, and more than a quarter of a century by its second, radio.

False Hypothesis

THE argument that the new is always the enemy of the old is, in fact, fallacious. In arguing that television will take people away from books we clearly assume, in the first place, that people had books to be taken away from.

Did the farm labourer who now gazes at Mr. Gilbert Harding on his screen formerly amuse himself by reading Dostoevsky? I'm afraid not.

As a viewer I have seen in nine months two good plays; I have seen two or three popular orchestral concerts; I have fallen in love with

By
H. E. BATES

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Over 3m. people have television sets, and a quarter of them look in every night. Yet night is the normal time for reading. Mr. Bates discusses whether the result will be fatal to books.

Andy Pandy, Sir Mortimer Wheeler and Miss Mary Malcolm.

Apart from that I am forced to contemplate a chilling paradox: one, in fact, unmatched in our history. Never before, indeed, has it been necessary to erect across the country, at prodigious cost, a series of masts built solely for the dissemination of wholesale commonplaces.

Does anyone honestly think that the present television programmes, with their often charming casts, are a threat to books? A person who loves and appreciates books does not suddenly throw "David Copperfield" into the fire because he cannot forgo the excruciating pleasure of seeing someone demonstrate a patent mousetrap.

Reading cannot be threatened by these things any more than it can be threatened by a football match, a circus or a whist-drive.

I do not think television is a threat to anything, least of all the influence of a writer upon his generation and the respect of his generation for the writer. You might argue that potentially the greatest threat of all, during the past 50 years, has been the motor-car. Yet during the

course of that influence our interest in books, music, drama, ballet, painting and sculpture has widened as it has never widened before.

Television is, in fact, an extension of man's way of living. So is playing golf or eating caviare. We may all wish that our golf was better or that caviare was cheaper. In the same way we can only hope that television will grow up, as I have no doubt it will.

Potential Ally

IN contending all this I find that I am supported by one of the leading publishers of the day. "Television is to-day regarded as the chief enemy of reading," he has said publicly. "I am not so seriously alarmed by this menace as are some of my colleagues.

"Publishers should not fight against television but regard it as a potential ally. As with sound radio, there can be reviews of books, dramatised excerpts, serial versions of novels."

I wonder, incidentally, if any one at Lime Grove has ever thought of a programme in which the only necessary picture is that of the turning pages of an open book? Sick, elderly and convalescent people might find this simple method of reading for a quarter of an hour each afternoon a very pleasant and untiring diversion.

Neither television nor radio, film nor motor-car, can themselves cause love of books to lessen. Only bad writing can stop good reading. Without the author there can be no publishers, no booksellers, no newspapers, no editors, no actors, no theatres, no films, no directors, no producers. That is the degree of his importance—a fact that future planners of television would do well to remember.

World Chess Championship

By HENRY TILLEY

CHESS players all over the world will have their eyes on Moscow next Tuesday, when two Russians, Mikhail Botvinnik, the holder, and Vassily Smyslov, begin a two-month match for the world championship. In Russia, where chess is as popular as cricket is here, big crowds will attend the 24 games.

This national enthusiasm goes far to explain why two Russians should be fighting for the crown. Smyslov has gained his chance by winning a candidates' tournament in Switzerland last October, where nine of the 15 grandmasters were Russians.

No Britons contested that tournament, for there are no British grandmasters. It is not that we have small aptitude for the game, but chess in Britain does not command enough support either for a professional to make a living or for an amateur to obtain leave each year to compete in grandmaster tournaments.

The only way to become a grandmaster is to outplay established grandmasters. British experts gain masterships in their holidays by winning lesser tourneys, but are denied the chance of entering the highest class.

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Russians learn chess very early. Strategy is mastered at school, and a talented boy is soon introduced to high-class play. Botvinnik and Smyslov were masters in their teens.

Yet Britain has had her hour of glory. After his defeat of the French champion Saint-Amant in a

still-quoted match of 1843, Howard Staunton reigned unbeaten for eight years, and London was the capital of chess. Staunton's reputation survived his 1851 defeat, for when Paul Morphy came to Europe from America seven years later it was to seek a match with Staunton. In this he was disappointed, and after beating every other major player he gave the game up in contempt.

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Neither Morphy nor Staunton was a recognised world champion. The title did not exist until 1886, when Steinitz beat Zukertort.

The crown passed from champion to champion until Alekhine's death in 1946 created a vacuum. The International Chess Federation, which for many years had been seeking to regulate title matches and find challengers in a less haphazard way, arranged a tournament in 1948 between the five leading players, which Botvinnik decisively won.

A candidates' tournament, to be held every two years to find a challenger, was also established. David Bronstein, whose recent defeat by the British master Alexander caused so much glee, won the first and held Botvinnik to a draw in 1951.

Smyslov was runner-up to Botvinnik in the 1948 tournament. At 33 he is almost 10 years younger than the champion, and age, with its sapping of nerve, concentration and stamina, is the chessmaster's worst enemy. Few players retain their old skill into their fifties, but nobody acquainted with Botvinnik's outstanding record over 20 years will envy Smyslov his task.