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LIFE AND LETTERS

EDITED BY DESMOND MACCARTHY

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LIFE AND LETTERS

THE EDITOR

LITERARY TABOOS

Since the last number of *Life & Letters* appeared an event has occurred which a magazine of this kind ought to discuss, namely, the suppression of Miss Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. This novel was attacked as a poisonous production by a Sunday newspaper; its publisher then appealed for advice to the Home Secretary, who indicated in reply that it must be withdrawn from circulation. And this was immediately done. The Home Secretary's letter has not been published, but we may take it for granted that it was emphatic. There was, of course, no legal authority behind such a letter compelling the publisher to obey: he could have waited till the book was prosecuted and fought the matter in the Courts, but presumably he was told pretty frankly that he would lose his case. This proceeding is on a par with other recent interferences with the liberty of the subject in such matters. Many people have had taken away from them at the Customs, when returning from abroad, books which some one has decided are not good for them. Though there is a law which enables the Post Office as a Public Service to refuse to carry literature declared to be indecent, why should the law forbid a private person to carry a book which he has bought for his own use? He may not sell an indecent book, but it is not yet a criminal offence to possess one.

Now, in Ireland, a Bill has been laid before the Dáil Eireann called the Censorship of Publications Bill, which appoints a board of five members to advise the Minister for Justice, who shall henceforth have the power to suppress any book or printed publication on the ground of 'indecent'; and 'the word indecent', I quote the Bill, 'shall be construed as including calculated to excite sexual passion or to suggest or incite to sexual immorality or in any other way to corrupt or deprave'. Any person bringing, without a special permit, such a book or paper into Ireland will be liable henceforth to a fine of £50 or six months' imprisonment. No book or newspaper which advocates 'or which might reasonably be supposed to advocate' birth control, or which contains any reference 'to any disease affecting the generative organs of either sex . . . or to the prevention of irregularities of menstruation . . . or to treatment', shall henceforth be allowed into the country!

People in England no longer take much notice of what goes on in Ireland, but they will be interested to see how thoroughly they are carrying out there the principles of Censorship and Inquisition. The whole literature is to be put at the mercy of five men; for almost any passage may be interpreted as 'calculated to excite sexual passion, or in any other way to corrupt', by four out of five persons selected, presumably, for their interest in public morals; while to introduce, say, a copy of *The Times* which contains a letter on the prevention of venereal disease or birth control will also be a criminal offence. Since the motives behind this extravagantly foolish and disastrous Bill are similar to those behind the more surreptitious and moderate methods employed in this country, it is worth while to raise the whole question of Censorship. I therefore

submit the following reflections to the consideration of my readers.

THE YOUNG PERSON

'A fool will be a fool with the best book, yea, or without book.'
MILTON (*Areopagitica*).

I remember many years ago travelling in a railway-carriage full of undergraduates. One of them drew a photograph from his pocket, which he handed round for inspection. I waited with some curiosity for it to reach my neighbour so that I, too, could see what was provoking some signs of sly and salacious delight: it was a photograph of a Sir Joshua lady. This was an instance of a truth which many readers' memories will probably confirm (I certainly might have deduced it from my own), namely, that human beings, in certain circumstances, will seek anywhere for something to stimulate their lubricity, or at certain ages to satisfy their curiosity. If the most rigid censorship were exercised over fiction and poetry in sex matters, any poem or novel which went a step beyond the confines of a *Bibliothèque Rose* would still be sought out for that purpose. In a novel which has recently appeared, which is a study of American adolescence, *The Rampant Age*, by Robert S. Carr (Heinemann. 7s. 6d.), you will find the boys looking for stimulus in *The Idylls of the King*: 'they pretty nearly do some hot neckin' in a couple of places, only they never quite make it,' one of them remarks, after reading *Lancelot and Elaine*. You cannot keep rooks out of a park by shutting the gates. Some would not wish even these facts about adolescence to be known: vulgarity is not pleasant. But the facts bear on this most vital question. If we are prepared to sacrifice the advantages of free-writing, we must be certain, first, that it

is any use. Is anyone prepared to prosecute *The Idylls of the King*?

WHY PEOPLE DO NOT WANT CERTAIN MATTERS DISCUSSED

The behaviour of the Censor of Plays is instructive on this point. Apart from rules limiting the vocabulary of playwrights, he is guided by certain taboos. Plays must not deal with certain subjects. He has a considerable body of public opinion behind him. Many people not only do not wish to see such plays themselves, but also to prevent others from seeing them. Why? Before attempting to answer this rather difficult question, let us watch the behaviour of the Censor. For thirty or forty years the performance of Ibsen's *Ghosts* was forbidden on the ground that it dealt with venereal disease, and contained a suggestion of incest. The interest in Ibsen has declined and the performance of *Ghosts* is now allowed. Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* was banned because it was an exposure of 'white-slave traffic'; now that the public is mainly interested in new Shaw plays, and the subject of it is openly discussed elsewhere, it is permitted to be performed. The case of Brioux's *Damaged Goods* is still more instructive. It was, in effect, a lecture on the dangers of venereal disease. The Censor forbade us to hear it; but during the war, when for military reasons wide-spread knowledge on that subject was desirable (though, of course, it was desirable also before), the performance of this play was encouraged. What can we deduce from this behaviour on the part of the Censorship? Clearly, that there is no conviction behind its decisions, no principle, such as can even pretend to justify the muzzling of the artist, the social reformer and the thinker. New plays, however, on the same topics con-

tinue to be liable to the same treatment, for the motive is to avoid as much 'unpleasantness' as possible. And this brings us back to the question, Why do people wish certain questions not to be discussed? The emotional force behind such objection derives, it appears to me, from two sources. Society is genuinely afraid of moral results which may follow from discussion, and, secondly, in some cases this fear is enormously strengthened by its bad conscience. There are many questions which people are reluctant to see raised because they are not certain if their own attitude towards them is honest, or what it really is, and to ascertain that would complicate life and entail a painful candour towards themselves. This is not a respectable reason for maintaining a taboo, but it is one of the reasons why taboos are backed by a specially strong emotion in matters concerned with sex. Examples of a bad conscience having prevented discussion in other directions can be found. Take only one: when, in 1848, a Public Health Bill was before Parliament, *The Economist* (a most enlightened paper, under a most enlightened editor) attacked it on orthodox *laissez faire* principles, but refused to discuss details, on the ground that to do so would involve printing many offensive words. Society did not want to be reminded of the results of its own neglect of the housing problem: incest, animal promiscuity, filthy sanitary conditions, disease. Bad conscience consequently took the form of feeling that to use words which described the facts was an anti-social offence. The man, be he novelist or pamphleteer, who clears dirt out of the corners of a room into the middle of it where it can be seen, is always liable to be accused of having made the mess himself, and to be treated as an enemy of society in consequence. Such moral indignation on the part of

the public is not, of course, the sign of moral conviction but of a bad conscience.

MORE RESPECT-WORTHY FEARS AND THEIR RESULTS

But the desire to keep others in ignorance of facts about human nature or society does not spring alone from the above cause. It has also a more respect-worthy foundation. If certain topics are debated, even with detachment and discretion, and even if the conclusions reached are approved, still, the mere fact of airing them will, it is feared, destroy a proper abhorrence of them. Things are only felt to be utterly evil so long as they are treated as too bad to be mentioned. This, I think, is true. It is impossible to continue to feel the same terrified aversion from anything that is talked or written about openly. I believe this to be the explanation of Mr. James Douglas's reaction to such a book as *The Well of Loneliness*, in which there is not an indecent word: familiarity breeds tolerance. This fear, no doubt, would lead him and the Home Secretary to suppress, if they could, also Mr. Compton Mackenzie's last novel, *Extraordinary Women*; although that book is not a cry of loneliness from one caught in an abnormal predicament, but an exposure of the rasping and mean emotional muddles which are consequences of it. Now, granted that those who wish to maintain literary taboos in order that as large a number as possible of the community may continue to feel towards many manifestations of sex the same kind of instinctive abhorrence which is felt by clean people towards excrement—an abhorrence which is apt, as we know, to turn sometimes into a kind of fascination—the question still remains, Is abhorrence the best attitude towards anything which morality not only con-

demns but wishes to cure? We should not think well of a doctor who encouraged in himself those revulsions which are thought appropriate in a nice person. And if the retort follows: We are not all doctors, the reply to that is that so far as our own moral lives are concerned we are, and that, though others may help us, every teacher of humanity since the world began has insisted that our cure lies in our own hands. Knowledge of ourselves and human nature is therefore necessary to us, while panic fears are, as every psychologist or spiritual director knows, worse than useless. The ground for wishing to suppress certain books is that they put ideas into people's heads which, so would-be Censors think, would never have otherwise got there. This is not by any means always true—but let that pass. Do they never stop to reflect that for some cases in which this may happen there may be others in which the same book discovers to men and women the direction in which they are unconsciously going and do not wish to go? No: knowledge is to be kept away from as many as possible, for fear knowledge should breed tolerance, and this fear has led to the suppression of even scientific books. The case of Havelock Ellis's book on *The Psychology of Sex*, recognized throughout the world as work of the first order, is instructive. It was not meant for general circulation, but it was suppressed because it might be read as a stimulus to sex excitement.

THE CASE OF HAVELOCK ELLIS

It will be as well to quote a passage from his writings, which shows the spirit in which he undertook these investigations:

'Now that I have at length reached the time for beginning to publish my results, these results scarcely seem to me large. As a youth, I had hoped to settle problems for those who came after; now I am quietly content if I do little more than state them. For even that, I now think, is much: it is at least the half of knowledge. In this particular field the evil of ignorance is magnified by our efforts to suppress that which never can be suppressed, though in the effort of suppression it may become perverted. I have at least tried to find out what are the facts, among normal people as well as among abnormal people; for, while it seems to me that the physician's training is necessary in order to ascertain the facts, the physician for the most part only obtains the abnormal facts, which alone bring little light. I have tried to get at the facts, and, having got at the facts, to look them simply and squarely in the face. If I cannot, perhaps, turn the lock myself, I bring the key which can alone in the end rightly open the door: the key of sincerity. That is my one panacea: sincerity.

'I know that many of my friends, people on whose side I, too, am to be found, retort with another word: reticence. It is a mistake, they say, to try to uncover these things: leave the sexual instincts alone, to grow up and develop in the shy solitude they love, and they will be sure to grow up and develop wholesomely. But, as a matter of fact, that is precisely what we cannot and will not ever allow them to do. There are very few middle-aged men and women who can clearly recall the facts of their lives, and tell you in all honesty that their sexual instincts have developed easily and wholesomely throughout. And it should not be difficult to see why this is so. Let my friends try to transfer their feelings and theories from the reproductive region to, let us say, the nutritive region, the only other which can be compared to it for importance. Suppose that eating and drinking was never spoken of openly, save in veiled or poetic language, and that no one ever ate food publicly, because it was considered immoral and immodest to reveal the mysteries of this natural function. We know what would occur. A considerable proportion of the community, more especially the more youthful members, possessed by an instinctive and legitimate curiosity, would concentrate their thoughts on the subject. They would have so many problems to puzzle over: How often ought I to eat? What ought I to eat? Is it wrong to eat fruit, which I like? Ought I to eat grass, which I don't like? Instinct notwithstanding, we may be quite sure that only a small minority would succeed in eating reasonably and wholesomely. The sexual secrecy of life is even more disastrous than such a nutritive secrecy would be; partly because we expend such a wealth of moral energy in directing or

misdirecting it, partly because the sexual impulse normally develops at the same time as the intellectual impulse, not in the early years of life, when wholesome instinctive habits might be formed. And there is always some ignorant and foolish friend who is prepared still further to muddle things. Eat a meal every other day! Eat twelve meals a day! Never eat fruit! Always eat grass! The advice emphatically given in sexual matters is usually not less absurd than this. When, however, the matter is fully open, the problems of food are not, indeed, wholly solved, but everyone is enabled by the experience of his fellows to reach some sort of situation suited to his own case. And when the rigid secrecy is once swept away, a sane and natural reticence becomes for the first time possible.'

He goes on to say that secrecy has not always been maintained, and 'that when the Catholic Church was at the summit of its power and influence, it fully realized the magnitude of sexual problems, and took an active and enquiring interest'. He gives as an instance of such treatises Sanchez's *De Matrimonio*, in which the whole sexual life of men and women is analysed in its relationships to sin. 'Everything is set forth, as clearly and concisely as it can be—without morbid prudery or morbid sentiment—in the coldest scientific language.' In spite of that and of being written from a theological point of view, such a book would not escape now the fate of Mr. Havelock Ellis's *The Psychology of Sex*. There would be the same risk of its being read with the wrong motive.

On May 27th 1898, a disguised detective bought a copy of *The Psychology of Sex* from the publisher, Mr. George Bedborough, who was then put in jail and charged with 'publishing an obscene libel with the intention of corrupting the morals of Her Majesty's subjects'. The case finally came up at the Central Criminal Court. (For a full account of the proceedings, see *Havelock Ellis*, by Houston Peterson, Allen & Unwin.) The accused pleaded guilty,

as he was convinced the decision would go against him and had ascertained that he would, if he pleaded guilty, be treated leniently. He was therefore condemned for publishing 'a certain lewd, wicked, bawdy, scandalous, and obscene libel, in the form of a book entitled *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*', and the Recorder, in giving judgement and binding him over, said, 'I am willing to believe that in acting as you did, you might at the first outset perhaps have been gulled into the belief that somebody might say that this was a scientific work. But it is impossible for anybody with a head on his shoulders to open the book without seeing that it is a pretence and a sham, and that it is merely entered into for the purpose of selling this obscene publication.'

'For us on the Continent,' an eminent criminologist wrote to Ellis, 'such a proceeding is altogether incomprehensible. What would become of science and its practical applications if the pathology of sexual life were put on the Index? It is as if Sir Spencer Wills were to be classed with Jack the Ripper.'

This case shows clearly the dilemma with which society is faced. There is no doubt that the book might, as the Recorder saw, have put lewd thoughts into a reader's mind; also, no doubt that it was the most important contribution yet made to a knowledge of sex. Has society so little faith in the value of knowledge that it is prepared to prosecute and punish anyone who publishes an enquiry into the nature of sex, because that enquiry may incidentally excite obscene thoughts in some readers' minds? No educated person would say that investigation must be stopped; but many would say that such subjects must be kept out of fiction. Why?

WHY?

It is impossible to keep sex out of fiction, drama, and poetry. No one disputes that. It is also impossible to ensure that the manner in which it is treated will be approved by all. A passage which strikes one person as harmless, seems to another indecent. And not only has every short period had its own standard of reticence, but at any one time different groups of people have had different standards of decency. It is so of course to-day. Nevertheless, there is at any rate a vague agreement (very vague it certainly is) that this or that treatment of a subject is reprehensible. Such a consensus of opinion exercises a most powerful influence upon literature at any moment. It sets the tone; though there have always been some authors who have flown in the face of it—usually with the approval of a few, and the disapproval of many. Literary history shows, however, that this general consensus is always changing; and since mankind preserves the literature of the past, books of every degree of licence exist together. Therefore, unless one generation is prepared to destroy its literary heritage, and, say, to insist that Shakespeare is only to be published in expurgated editions, and some masterpieces not allowed to circulate, it seems hardly worth while to call in the police to prevent a contemporary author going half-way as far as older authors in over-stepping the conventions of the moment. It was ludicrous on the part of the countrymen of Rabelais to penalize Flaubert for writing *Madame Bovary*, especially as a few years later 'the general tone' altered so much that it was quite impossible to insist upon the book being any longer banned. 'The tone' is changing very rapidly in England to-day, both in literature and in

conversation. Everybody notices it; many regret it. The old standards of reticence (they were not very old) have lost their authority. Miss Rhoda Broughton, at the end of her life, used to say amusingly, 'When I began to write I was a Zola, now I am a Charlotte Yonge'. There was not, of course, an improper word in her novels, but the heroines were described as feeling passionately when in love, and even as falling in love with a man before he was in love with them. There are many people still alive who remember in their youth the works of Charlotte Brontë being withheld on that account. It seems startling at first sight, but those who locked up copies of *Jane Eyre* were prompted by the same feelings as those who now have just banned *The Well of Loneliness*. They wished that *Jane Eyre* should not be read because it made people, especially young people, aware that women existed whose experience of love is passionate. They did not wish knowledge of facts to spread for fear that readers should recognize the emotions described. They knew these facts themselves, but they conceived it was bad for the community that they should be more generally known. In the case of *The Well of Loneliness* the passion described is abnormal; it is the story of a woman who falls in love with another woman. That there is a very small percentage of human beings of both sexes whose love-life is centred on members of their own sex is a fact about human nature which is well known; why should it not be generally known? What harm can a book do which deals with the unfortunate complications which result from such aberrations? Here and there it might suddenly reveal a reader to herself. It might again suddenly explain to a reader of another kind the behaviour of some one else towards her. Why should this be bad for them? Is there not, on the

contrary, a possibility that such a book may be of service, helping them to recognize traits in themselves and in others, and so know more surely where they are? Again, if it is true that these abnormal tendencies are mixed, as in the case of normal instincts in normal people, with emotions which the abnormal person recognizes as the noblest he, or she, is capable of feeling, ought not their fellow human beings to know this? If people are treated as inhuman monsters, they become monsters; and what is more serious, those who mistakenly think themselves abnormal (in youth this mistake is easy) conceive themselves as only fitted to associate with those who really are. The fear that if such novels are not at once suppressed the book-market will be flooded with them, is empty. A curiosity sale is soon over. In my youth, when the tone of the times was stricter both in conversation and in print, *Moll Flanders* and translations of Maupassant and Flaubert were purchased and read furtively for the sake of the suggestions a few passages might carry to an eager curiosity. Now those books are read, as they ought to be, for their merits. The same thing would happen in the case of such books as *The Well of Loneliness*. History shows that only those communities have flourished in which men were allowed to pool their experience and comment freely on life, and that the suppression of freedom is a graver risk to civilization than the circulation of any particular book to morality.

THE WELL
OF LONELINESS

RADCLYFFE HALL

1928 - 1975