

THE STRIKE AND THE PRESS

ONE of the incidents of the Strike was the suppression of some of the big newspapers and the curtailment of all of them. The news was most scanty at the very time when, from hour to hour, everyone was eager for bulletins. In the more remote parts of the country the disorganised postal services prevented even the arrival of the meagre sheet that did service for the morning paper; and those people who had not access to the wireless were left mostly in the dark. Most of the journalists were silenced by the stoppage of the printing machines; and those writers who could have their say were, owing to the abnormal conditions, reduced to a brevity of utterance and a terseness of expression more often met with in the writings of the mediæval philosophers than in the outpourings of the philosophers of Fleet Street. The wireless and the stump orator came into their own. The former, we suspected, from its reticence about the Archbishop of Canterbury's peace appeal, was being controlled on some principle of artificial selection; and the latter gave us views rather than news. The British public, which is often accused of relying with a too slavish trust upon its press, found that it had to live through a very trying time without the light and leading that comes from the printed word—or, at least, with very little of it. The powerful *Daily Mail* disappeared before the strike began. Some say that its disappearance was the occasion if not the cause of things being brought to a head.

Now, there has been a great deal of indignation expressed—chiefly in the newspapers, be it noted—about this attack upon the liberties of the press. It was certainly a wrong inflicted on the proprietors of

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the newspapers, the editors, the sub-editors, the journalists, the news-vendors, and all who make their living by some connection with the newspapers; but I do not think that the general public is unanimous in its opinion that it was such an assault on newspaper-reading England as the newspapers would have us believe. That philosophical calm and serene good humour, which to a wild, hysterical Celt like myself always make the English character a matter for wonder and envy, were as conspicuous in this problem of the dearth of news as in all the other inconveniences and deprivations of the strike.

For over a week we had no daily crime sheet, no divorce news, no dreary list of depressing human frailties. Two whole Sundays were real days of rest—veritable holidays from the sex, sensation and sentiment stuff, the staple sabbath-reading of the devotees of certain Sunday papers. Every evil is some good spelt backwards; and this suppression, if only for a brief space, of some of the less pleasant elements of journalism, was one of the minor good things that came out of an evil strike. Even the advantage of such a temporary suppression of a few unsavoury papers, which at ordinary times all are free to refuse to buy, is no excuse or justification for a general strike. We do not advocate breaking a butterfly on a wheel, still less an earth-worm.

But there is an even greater good to be found in the disappearance of the newspapers. It is even possible to believe that the strike actually ended as soon and as happily as it did because there were so few papers to stampede public opinion.

It is so easy to become drugged with over much reading. Reading is too often a refusal to think and too seldom an incentive thereto. There is a type of person who is said to see no further than his nose, and this is especially true of some when they hold a

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newspaper in front of the nose. Reading maketh a full man; but reading without thinking maketh a fool man.

The press boasts of its power to mould public opinion, yet during the strike, when there was little or no press to do the moulding, public opinion expressed itself with no uncertainty about the rights and wrongs of the conflict. People were able to think untrammelled by the newspapers, and the popular verdict seems to have been that the strike was a gigantic mistake which the Government should have been as eager to prevent as it was ready to crush. People may have thought in terms of such realities as bread and butter, tired feet, and innumerable other discomforts; but they did not think in terms of the unrealities of the great big press.

The war killed many illusions in the minds of English readers about their press, which they discovered sometimes gave them doctored news. The strike has done much to kill the illusion that by buying a newspaper a man can purchase ready-made ideas and have his thinking done for him.

Cured of illusion, perhaps readers may be moved to turn from the big papers to something less blatant and less pretentious. Here is the opportunity for the small independent paper. Here perhaps is a sign that the scheme of a Catholic Daily, for which we publish a plea in this issue of *BLACKFRIARS*, is not so wildly impossible as it would at first sight appear.

During the strike various efforts were made in different quarters to cope with the news shortage. The Government founded a daily, *The British Gazette*, under the general editorship and control of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. *The Daily Herald*, representing the other point of view, appeared transformed and renamed as *The British Worker*; and a little group of men at Oxford launched *The British Independent*,

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whose professed aim was conciliation. *The British Independent* only appeared twice, and then expired with the end of the strike. The other two papers have reverted to their original characters and names.

It might be suggested that the proposed Catholic Daily—call it *The British Catholic* or *The British Christian*, or what you will—be started in the small way of these three emergency papers. Most of the newspapers are much too large. Who among us has the time or the inclination or the need to read the twenty-four or the thirty-two pages of two typical morning papers, *The Times* and *The Morning Post*? The columns and columns of advertisements and quotations from the money markets are for most of us sheer waste of print; and it would be more economical if these items were printed in special papers for the people who are interested in them.

A small paper would have all the advantages of economy. A Catholic Daily consisting of two double sheets would provide ample scope for giving Catholics all they want to know of what is going on in Church and State. The editor of a small paper, remembering that, after all, writing is not an end, but a means, would only have to consider that he was providing news and views to his readers, and he would not be faced with the dangerous necessity of having to fill, by hook or by crook, a certain number of columns.

The writer who pleads in this issue for a Catholic Daily makes a wise suggestion when he advocates financing the venture by small subscriptions from every Catholic parish in the land. Let all contribute, let all be interested in it in every sense of the word interest, let it represent all; in other words, let it be Catholic in deed and in name.

THE EDITOR.