

THE MEN FROM OVERSEAS

DONALD COWIE

WE all have a favourite question which we would like to be asked if we sat on a Brains Trust. Mine would be: "Do you consider that inhabitants of the British Commonwealth overseas are developing their own national characteristics?" I don't say that I could provide a satisfactory or even a coherent answer, but I certainly would not lack human material to illustrate the question. Since the beginning of the war, after coming from New Zealand myself, I have been encountering men from overseas. Let us see what we can learn from a few thumb-nail sketches.

Let us consider, for example, the portrait in miniature of an old New Zealand friend of mine—I shall not give his name, because his recent death has caused so much pain to relatives—whom I first knew as an almost too well-behaved young man. We used to find, I must admit, a touch of the prig in his talk about playing the game and community service. Remember that extraordinary book of Victorian "pep talk" by Dr. Samuel Smiles, called *Self Help*. My young New Zealand friend was the personification of that.

The feature that made us doubt him was, of course, the material side of his policy. It enabled him to prosper so well: in his early twenties he became a departmental manager of his firm; then he threw away that good job to work his passage to England, that he might enlarge his business experience in a great London store. His attention to work in that store was so conscientious that he rapidly rose to a responsible position again: neither smoking nor drinking, nor allowing himself the luxury of a girl, he appeared as a paragon beside the ordinary London employees: then, when the managing director one day offered him a supremely important post for a man of his age, he said he was returning to New Zealand.

He explained to me, however, that it was all part of his plan. With his London experience he should be able, in New Zealand again, to begin the career of a merchant prince. And, in the next few years, the serious, extraordinary fellow did give promise of such a consummation. He worked long hours, denied himself pleasure, ruled a great business. The war broke out.

I confess I was not surprised when I heard that my friend had swiftly entered the Army—and obtained himself a job as an

instructor there. But last year he did amaze me. One day he arrived in England a volunteer for the Royal Air Force, to begin training as a pilot in Bomber Command.

I shall not attempt here to analyse all the reasons for my amazement. Suffice it to say that my friend was over thirty, and, although the most upright of exemplary young citizens, had hitherto been chiefly conspicuous for concentration on the main personal chance.

Well, he passed through his training swiftly, became a bomber pilot and, on his first operational flight, occupied as co-pilot a giant machine which crashed soon after taking off, incinerating its crew. They found a letter he had written, saying that he placed his trust in God.

Now I have opened my little gallery with that portrait because it is in many ways typical. Let me pass on directly to No. 2, whom I shall name Mendelsohn. He was, when first brought to my attention, playing piano on the platform of an N.A.A.F.I. tent in the camp of the Palestinian Company of the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps. He was a fair young man in British battle-dress, not at all like the son of a Slovakian Jew who had left a prosperous chemical business in Jaffa to volunteer for the most menial of military jobs. Nor was his music consonant with his background or calling. The dark Arab and Jewish faces in the audience before him rippled with pleasure as the liquid notes tinkled.

That was before the Battle of France. I heard of Mendelsohn after that tragedy. At St. Malo his unit had refused to be evacuated till all others were gone. Despite that their origin would expose them to terrible treatment if they were taken prisoner, they waited and, at the end, when German advance troops were nearing the town, Mendelsohn most illegally cast away his labourer's pick and, seizing a rifle, led some of his dusky fellows out to meet them. The result was anti-climax, for the Germans were delayed and all the Palestinians were successfully evacuated, but Mendelsohn had made his gesture.

New Zealand, Palestine, and now, what of that most individual and important overseas land of all, Canada? Probably each of my readers could him or herself contribute a sketch of an adequate Canadian No. 3 in this pregnant gallery. We know so many in England nowadays, most of us having met men like that David Croll, Mayor of Windsor, Ontario, who arrived in

the uniform of a private, that Harold Thompson, the full-blooded Indian, that James Campbell, native of Greenock, who had sold his hard-won Canadian tobacco farm to join up. But I have two special miniatures in my album.

One is of a young Toronto boy, the real silver-spoon type. He had been educated at Charterhouse in England, then at Toronto University with a scholarship. Soon revealing himself as a mathematician and physicist of potential eminence, he joined the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve on the outbreak of war instead of accepting a safe and valuable job—to be killed soon after in action at sea.

The other is of a very great friend, tall, fair, boyish, and with a Yankee drawl that entirely conceals his Belgian origin. Yes, he was born and educated a Belgian, but emigrated with great courage to Canada, avowedly that he might escape the Old World's squalor and hopelessness. After some years he had wrested for himself a small farm from the new land, and won through the depression, and married. The war came and he had volunteered—to go back. That must have been, perhaps, the greatest sacrifice of all. But more: my friend had not only enlisted in the Army and come to Britain, but had just transferred to an air-borne unit, that he might be among the first eventually to land in his abandoned country.

The page of memory turns and I see, for No. 4 in my gallery, an Australian whom I knew, named William Joseph Hickey.

As a small boy, he had made up his mind to become a pilot. He had spent most of his spare time in an aerodrome workshop at Sydney, and had tried repeatedly to enter the Royal Australian Air Force before he was old enough. But he succeeded eventually, and had his local training. The greater moment came when he was selected to go to England under the attachment scheme. He served five years with the Royal Air Force, and was sent to the Middle East in charge of a squadron in August, 1940. He should have returned to Australia as an expert flying instructor, but asked that he be allowed to obtain some real fighting experience first. This he had when the squadron was suddenly moved to Greece.

Hickey's squadron quickly destroyed 42 Italian aircraft, for the loss of only three of its own machines, but one of them was Hickey's.

He had a remarkable concern for his pilots. The day before his death he was fighting himself against several Italians, when

he saw a companion, severely wounded, jump from a burning fighter. Hickey followed the dangling figure down, and circled around him again and again, to attract the attention of Greek troops in the vicinity. Having done so, he flew off, landed in very difficult country, and organized a relief party to bring the wounded pilot home. Then he was not satisfied till the man had been carried over miles of mountainous country, sometimes under heavy enemy fire, and was safely in hospital. He remained by his side all night, to ensure that he had the best attention. With dawn the weary man returned to his squadron and led them into battle again. He was weary and died.

Similarly whenever the thought of South Africa enters my mind nowadays, it is coupled with a picture that must be placed No. 5, of a sturdy, silver-haired man marching at high speed, shoulders thrown back, into a room where I was awaiting him at South Africa House, Trafalgar Square, London. I remember how I regarded Deneys Reitz curiously, looking beneath the surface to find the young man who had fought so hard against the country he had now come to help.

He was now a minister of His Majesty's South African Government, sent to London on an important war mission. But 40 years before he had been a rebel Boer riding valiantly on the veldt, such a hater of England that when the South African War was over, he exiled himself for years in Madagascar rather than live under the conqueror. During those years he wrote the book *Commando*, a South African classic. But the outbreak of the First German War had found him enlisting in a *British* regiment, to become eventually its colonel.

When I met him at the beginning of this war, I asked Reitz if he could tell me honestly, without cant, what had changed his attitude towards the British. He blushed, and hesitated, and mumbled words to this effect: "Well, you see, Britain after defeating us in war treated us with a generosity unknown in history, and gave us even more liberty than we had enjoyed under our own Republics. To-day we are not only free, but far safer than we would be if we were on our own still. We *must* fight on Britain's side, for the devil is on the other."

After this my No. 6 can only be Sir Muhammad Zafrullah Khan, another Empire politician (now representing India in Chungking) who had similarly come to London to help, and who was inhabiting, when I met him, a suite in Grosvenor House.

I see him now, a large man in a double-breasted suit, bearded and turbaned incongruously, idly turning the pages of new "Penguins" with mahogany hands, and talking with the accent of a Cambridge don. His talk was not about politics or India's rights and wrongs. He *would* not discuss such subjects, and they did not appear to interest him. His conversation was all of statistics, and facts about the immense economic strength India would bring to the world's cause. I have thought of him often since, in conjunction with Sowar Abhe Ram.

Sowar Abhe was a boy of 18, fresh from the healthful Indian hills, and he was in a unit which was surrounded by German tanks at Mekili in Libya on April 8, 1941, after Rommel's first advance. As evening fell on that April 8, a cavalry squadron of about 100 Indians in 24 trucks drove straight down on the German guns, dismounted, and ran forward in a bayonet charge. Each man fought desperately till the open desert and freedom were before them again, but the bravest there was young Sowar Abhe Ram. As he and his companions ran forward, the waiting Germans sprayed them with the fire of automatic weapons and light field-guns. Abhe Ram's left arm was blown away above the elbow. At this he swerved towards his squadron commander in the melee, gave him his rifle, ammunition and bayonet, and gasped: "You take these now—I can't use them." Then he picked up another bayonet in his remaining hand and ran forward again, lunging dreadfully at Germans who did not wait to consider the marvel. He got through, and received—the D.C.M.

That is the note on which I would end, and it might well express what I had at the back of my mind when I began to write this article. From experience before and during this war one is forced to the conclusion that if the men from overseas have a distinguishing trait, it is their fundamental simplicity and capacity for acting according to the traditional rules of human behaviour. By contrast the men of the older lands are often more "sophisticated", perhaps less "spiritually youthful" in their reactions to the major issues of corporate life. What I would plead, then, if I were brought to a higher Bar, would be that these "innocents" should not lack their final reward, and that their sacrifices should not be in vain.