

# BACK IN MY TRACKS

## A Native Returns To Central Otago

IT seems to be permissible, when we reach a certain age, to look back and talk. Let that be the excuse for this article. I have reached a certain age. It is 50 years since I left the house in which I am writing, the farm on which I am resting, and the school in which I have just been standing, to "continue my education." I left, I can still remember painfully, with a lump in my throat as big as the Derwent potatoes we then cultivated; and little lumps can still come back.

But for a month I have been back in my tracks. What the lucky ones among our grandparents experienced when they returned after half a century to Great Britain I have experienced in Central Otago, and I hope it is more than egotism that makes me talk about it.

NEW ZEALAND is beginning to age.

Those of us who have lived more than 50 years here have seen the end of pioneering and at least the dawn of mechanisation. This is one of the richest agricultural districts in the South Island, but I have seen in a month only one team of plough horses. Riding horses are still used for mustering, but by no means every musterer depends on them. Many are carried to their beats by car with their dogs of course, and the tired and sick sheep come back in trucks or trailers. I sat for half-an-hour to-day with two shepherds who were waiting for a third man to come up and all their conversation was about petrol restrictions. On one farm I saw two boys of 15 and 17 working a tractor in shifts. Children too young to go to school know what a refrigerator is and have been known to start a car. It is almost as remote from the life of the 'nineties as a grand piano is from David's harp.

YET it was not the changes that most impressed when I first came back, but the things that are just the same. New Zealand is ageing, but the more Otago and Southland change the more

they are what they have always been. When I went to school in the 'nineties I returned to the same building for Sunday School. They are doing it still. When we said we had seen thousands of rabbits, we meant 20 or 30. That method of calculating remains. The local doctor used to be an authority on every branch of knowledge. The field is wider to-day, but his authority has not diminished. The stock auctioneers used to be the wittiest in the world. They are still world-shakers. Motor-cars carry on the speed records that used to be made by horses. Hospitality (as distinct from charity) is as boundless as ever it was, and charity (as distinct from generosity) as suspicious and narrow. The wind still runs through the tussocks on high days and holidays—not the gusty, disturbing winds of the North Island, but winds that blow with a steady rhythm, inducing calm and sleep. The speech is as broad as it used to be, and as rushed. R's are still r-r-r's, there is still *they're*, *sown* is still *sow-en*, *food* (long o) nearly always *food* (short o). *Dunedin* is still *D'need'n*. They still *dance* (short a). Fifty years ago there were good people and bad people but no neutrals or negatives. There are none to-day. Personality is as rank and strong as the tutu and fern still growing. It is stimulating, but it is overpowering, and it always was. You assert yourself or you don't exist—and sometimes it is as difficult to get yourself heard as to attract notice with a tin whistle when a brass band is playing. Hesitate in Otago or pipe low and you have always been lost.

BUT some things must change. Trees grow; towns decay; people die. What trees will do in 50 years you have to see to believe. You have also to see it to realise what the Forestry Service has done here in 40 years. Otago was never (away from the Coast) heavily bushed. It was not when I left it dotted close with clumps of trees planted for shelter by the first farmers: there were homestead plantations, but they were usually miles apart, and you did not get the impression, as you do in parts of Canterbury, that there had never been a pioneer period and that settlement went back to William the Conqueror at least. Otago is not a wooded province yet; but I stood yesterday on a peak overlooking 40 miles of farm and run country in any direction, and the most conspicuous features were two black areas 30 miles away which were State plantations—dense forests of 20, 30, and 40 years' growth, covering thousands of acres. And then there are the poplars and weeping willows of the Molyneux Valley. If you have not seen them in their background of sun-beaten rock you have not seen the most arresting landscape feature in your country. If I call

Written for  
"The Listener"  
by  
PEN HILL



"... Trees grow but towns decay"

them incredible I am merely saying again in old age what I felt in childhood, boyhood, and youth—that they can't be true, but are.

TREES grow but towns decay. Lawrence 50 years ago was as lively as a little town can be—as lively as all towns big or little are when gold is flowing through their shops and hotels and even through their schools and churches. There was no electricity in those days



but when the last lamp had been lit at sunset (off the back of a horse) the streets (every miner thought) were as gay as Piccadilly or Paris. Last week I sat in a car in the main street for nearly half-an-hour eating fruit and ice cream bought at the only open and lighted shop, and the rest was darkness and silence.

So it is with Tapanui, with Cromwell, with Arrowtown, and with Clyde. Roxburgh has gone ahead and Alexandra come to life again, both on fruit, but the pulse of other Central Otago towns is feeble and slow.

WHAT about the people? I have said that they are as hospitable as ever, as serious, and as full of character. What do they talk about?

The old times, of course, if they are themselves old, but never of those exclusively. There is almost no historic sense in Otago; no disposition to dwell on the past for its own sake and forget the future. All the people I have spoken to on this visit are forward-looking, even those who are easily my seniors. They look ahead, and they argue ahead, with all the vehemence and intensity of men who have not been beaten by life. A cousin of 83 spoke to me for two hours about his early surveying experiences—all extremely interesting—then switched without effort to the future of local government. His wife of 75 was glad that she had lived through such wonderful changes and that her grandchildren would see so many scientific developments. My brothers, who are years older than I am, bite at every fly I cast on the stream of their thoughts and nearly always make me feel foolish

and ineffective. Everybody has an opinion about the war—and (thanks to radio) quite as much information as I have, though information is my job.

Not many could talk calmly about politics, but not many ever could anywhere, and they say nothing worse in their excitement than half the newspapers of the world say every day. They also mean what they say and say what they mean, and are refreshingly free of political quislings. They would laugh at you if you asked them to support a candidate they knew to be a liar or a rogue; laugh at you or knock you down. It would be like asking them to sow bad seed or pay for the services of a mongrel bull.

They are so full of foundation virtues that I feel like a cheapjack among them—a fool when I question them, an ingrate when I argue with them. For there are few superior or privileged or lucky farmers here; few or no inheritors of wealth. They have worked for 20, 30, 40, or 50 years, some profitably, some unprofitably, and to question the accuracy of their claim that they are the original and only source of national wealth is, they feel, not only nonsense but offensive nonsense.

"Where would you fellows be without us?" one of them asked me.

"Where you would be," I answered, "if we did not exist."

But I was sorry the moment I had said it. The discussion ended abruptly, and I knew that I had dug a ditch between us that it would not be easy to fill in.

It was equally painful when manpower problems cropped up.

"Farmers are not essential," one of them said with bitterness. "Making pies is essential and making cigarettes, but farmers can be done without."

"Who told you that?" I asked. "The Government. I have been working here for 55 years, but that does not matter. If I had been a carpenter or a barber, a trimmer of nails or a producer of face paint, I could object when an assistant is taken away. But farming is not an essential industry."

"Are you sure?"  
"Quite certain."  
"Then what is the explanation?"  
"We're not important."  
"But everybody knows that you are."  
"Not this Government. It is out to ruin us."

(continued on next page)



"... They can't be true, but are"