

TRAVEL PATCHWORK

The Unofficial Side Of An Official Tour

MY travels began on official V-E day, and we rose up over the quiet suburbs just before the trams stopped running for the day. No one seemed to be abroad, and it had felt like Sunday morning as we drove out to the aerodrome. We swung away over the water and climbed to 7000 feet. Soon I had forgotten about being nervous, and started worrying instead about the clouds 100 miles ahead that threatened to spoil the view. Many vivid impressions crowd into your mind when you fly for the first time—a short joyride in childhood hardly counts in my case—but the ones I chiefly remember from the flight happen to relate to painters. In some crazy unpunctuated long paragraph, Gertrude Stein somewhere puts forward a theory that certain contemporary painters—Picasso in particular—have seen by their own intuition something about the world surrounding them that other people who lack that particular visual insight do not notice, and proof of its existence, she says, comes to those who fly. There is a good deal of truth in the idea, even if you don't go all the way with her in her interpretation of it, which is almost to suggest that the new view of the world which aviation affords was actually anticipated by French painters. In fact, an ugly suburb can take on a sort of cubist beauty when you are above it. And when we flew above the hills between Kai-koura and Cheviot, looking down between scattered clouds at slopes in the shadow, I found myself believing what some of our own New Zealand landscape painters have tried to show me in oils and water colour. Some of them insist on using certain ingredient colours which others, having conventional ideas and less insight, never use. The experimental ones are right, whether they have flown or not. You can see from the air colours you thought were "artistic license" when you saw them hung in the exhibition. All of which may support Miss Stein in her suggestion that good artists can see by a



"Waiting by the milk-can shelter"

kind of mental elevation of their own, what the rest of us can't see without an artificial aid.

ANOTHER artist who came repeatedly and irresistibly to my mind as we flew over the Canterbury plains, is one

who can hardly be connected with the Stein theory of aerial art, because his relationship to what I saw is more an accidental one. His name, Eric Ravilious, may not exactly be well-known here, but one small aspect of his work is—he engraved the endpaper designs and colophons for the modern Everyman's Library edition. If you have in your mind a general impression of his style, then the Canterbury Plains seem to be covered with woodcuts by him. Probably the autumn was the best time to see it. Ploughed fields are everywhere, and the shadows are marked, and the autumn sowing has not come on enough to obscure the patterns. Ravilious was a designer and engraver whose death during this war a great loss to English art. He was lost while flying over the north Atlantic, near Greenland, where he was at work as a war artist.

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IN a big factory you notice something about people that you forget when you see a crowd in the street. You realise that there are thousands of human beings all around you who hate their work. Either they must hate it, or if they don't, then their feelings have been numbed by that providential arrangement of things that makes it possible for a human being to endure what is apparently unendurable. The insensitivity of women's ears to eight hours a day of deafening roar and clatter must be something like the numbness that comes like a God-send with a shocking wound. You see rows of women operating with mechanical deftness the same process they have been at for hour after hour, day after day. Some giggle and smirk when you come in with their boss and you wish the floor would swallow you up. You see weedy men, pale men, over-muscular men, men who look as if they have never known the joys of good health. You see every kind of human weakness alongside the inhuman efficiency of multiple machinery, and you wonder why those people should have to be there. But afterwards perhaps you wonder where they would be if they didn't have those jobs.

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A FEW days after I saw the factory, circumstances threw me into the company at supper-time of a businessman, a contractor, and a builder. We drank tea and ate sandwiches, and one of the three employers started to talk about workers stopping for morning and afternoon tea.

"I don't know," he said, "but the other day my head clerk came and wanted permission for the office staff to have ten minutes off for afternoon tea—instead of drinking it while they got on with their work, you see. I told him I'd think it over. Well I did, and look—if you work it out, it's no bloody good this business. Take my show, on the outside job, where the award says they must have time off. Some of the chaps are right up on the scaffolding. The fellows down below give them a shout, and it takes them five minutes to come down. The billy's on, and they make tea. Some of them go to their bags and get a snack. They come back. All that takes time. Then

they drink their tea. Then they put away the mugs. Then they have to have a roll, and the ones that don't smoke stay and talk. Then they get back to the job, and it takes some of them a few minutes to get back to their work. And all in all you might say they take the best part of half-an-hour. That's twice a day. And there's twelve and a half per cent of your production gone!"

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I HAVE been to Mt. Cook only once, and then stayed no more than three hours. The journey there was a frightening one, made in a public Works truck which went for the purpose of delivering a box of detonators to some men on a blasting job. The box slid around in the dashboard cubby-hole while the empty truck bounded over the roads, and I remember that it was a very unpleasant journey indeed. I had been told that the contents of the box were sufficient to destroy a human body within six feet, and there was always the possibility of hitting a telegraph pole. Nor were my three hours at Mt. Cook much more enjoyable. It was the off season, and hardly anyone was around. I wandered off down

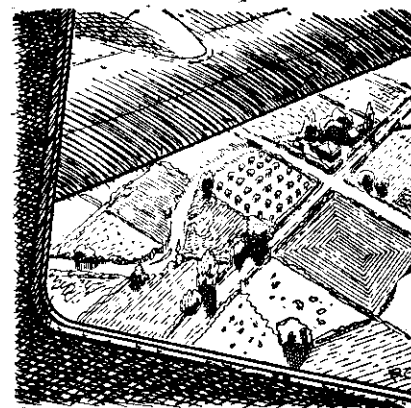


"I called 'Puss Puss'"

a track only to find it completely barred by the huge rotting maggotty carcase of a sow. I feel that I have now learned far more about the mountain from a remarkable painting of it—in tempera, I think—by C. Aubrey, which is to be found just on your right as you emerge from the lift on the top floor of a southern hotel. Its colours are magnificent, and quite unlike those of any other painting I have seen of the Southern Alps. All the rock and the ice is conceived as shattered into a million crystals, and the river comes tumbling noisily from the terminal face of the Tasman glacier, only to form a still pool a few yards away which is none the less effective for being completely unreal. I had not heard of C. Aubrey before.

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IF you are not a superstitious person, you tend to be ignorant of the various taboos. When I was told in one country hotel that my room was 12a, I thought at first it would be some sort of annexe. After inspection of the neighbouring doors it finally dawned on me that I was being protected from the visitation of some dreadful misfortune. Rain had been pouring down, and it was our intention next day to cross a wild stretch



"Woodcuts by Eric Ravilious"

of country by car, count six creeks past the turn-off, go another mile, and in the red gate. Before dark I opened my window and looked for signs of improvement. Perhaps the roads would be blocked. It was the first rain for months. I looked at the clouds. Then I looked down through the rails of the fire escape into what would be called in a police statement "the rear portion of the adjoining premises." I saw a kitten. Another one joined it. I called "Puss Puss" and made inviting sounds with my lips. Another cat appeared, and more kittens, until seven appealing faces were turned towards the window of room 12a. Perhaps seven cats are even more unlucky than Number 13. That night after I had sunk into a deep asleep, the night porter switched on my light. The local bus-driver, whose advice we had been seeking earlier about the state of the road, had sent him up. He shouted "Your road's got blocked. You'll have to go back the way you came." It was true. We had to turn back and lose about 150 miles. And for all I know, the red gate still stands open, waiting for us.

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IT was some time before we could leave next day, and I had time to fill in. I wandered through the township, bought a rare kitchen utensil long gone from the city shops, and strolled over to the main road bridge. The river was in high flood, and huge logs and conglomerations of driftwood were coming down one side. I watched enough firewood go past in a couple of minutes to last any ordinary household a whole winter. I cursed the rain—the first for months—that had turned us away from our most important objective on this part of the trip. I cursed the arrangement of things, whereby it was ordained that I should have to buy bad firewood at a price that works out at 2d for a piece nine inches long to put under coal that won't burn, while in this town people could have all the manuka and totara they wanted for the trouble of collecting it. An old man with a white beard came along the bridge. He was the real backblocks type, from his huge muddy boots to his ancient hat. He had been out in the wilds all his years, by the look of him. If I had told him I had seen women in the city with their hair dyed bright purple, he would have called me a liar. As he came by, he said to me, "She's been a great rain, eh?" I said "Sure."

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EVEN the best of scenic roads is dull going when you are in thick rain down in the valleys, and thick cloud up

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