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The Financial Position of New Zealand Writers



(Written for "The Listener" by
A. R. D. FAIRBURN)

I WISH to raise what is for me an important question — and that is, the position of New Zealand writers. By that I do not mean, at the moment, their position in public esteem; there is a minority of people that is prepared to give every encouragement to our writers, to tell them that they are doing an extremely valuable service to the community, to lavish kind words on them. But kind words butter no parsnips. I am concerned just now with a very simple and easily-understood aspect of the matter—and that is, with the financial position of New Zealand writers. And I am going to be unhesitatingly sordid about it.

I take it for granted that nobody will disagree with the proposition that it is necessary, for the health and proper development of the community, to maintain a body of writers, and to encourage them to produce literature and intelligent journalism to the extent of their abilities. Reading-matter of various kinds is as necessary as bread for any community that hopes to live at a higher level than that of the animals; and only the most primitive communities are content to import the whole of their reading-matter from outside sources.

The community in which we live fully accepts the principle of differential rewards. A judge of the Supreme Court is paid more than a night-watchman, a bank-manager more than his tellers. The question I am raising is this: in this scheme of things, are our writers paid as much as they should be?

Regular journalists, employed by newspapers and other journals, are comparatively well paid. A senior reporter, by diligent application to his work, can earn more than half what he would receive if he were employed at the abattoirs. The editor of a newspaper can, if the proprietors are generous, pull down a salary that is well over a third of an ordinary medical practitioner's income. The people who are in regular journalism have an organisation to look after their interests. My concern, just now, is rather with the free-lance journalists and occasional columnists. I should like to give readers of *The Listener* some idea of how these folk get along.

IN an ordinary newspaper column there are about 1,100 words. An article of that length may take two hours to write, or four hours. If there is any research to be done, it may take a day. In particular cases, where difficult subject matter has to be expressed simply, or where a good deal of preliminary study is necessary, it may take even longer. If the writer sells this article to a newspaper in New Zealand, he will, as a rule, get paid just the same amount for it however long it took him to write it. He will receive, from some newspapers, a pound; from others a guinea and a-half; from some

of the smaller journals with very small financial resources he may even get two guineas.

Try going to your lawyer and asking him to do, say, three hours' work for a guinea. Or to your doctor or dentist. The routine work these other professional men do, although it requires a good deal of knowledge or skill, is not exhausting. They can go on doing it for a good many hours every day without suffering from over-work. . . . Try writing two 1000-word articles a day (making them sufficiently interesting to gain the attention of the reading public) and keeping it up for five or six days a week. Your income will be roughly the same as that of a fairly industrious watersider or freezing-works employee. And you will have the additional satisfaction of being able to rate yourself as a super-man.

THERE is another thing to be noted. If you go to your lawyer or dentist and get some work done, you will at a later date receive a bill from him. But if you want to raise a horse-laugh in some newspaper office, send them an article; and then, if it's published, send them in a bill for two guineas (which in comparison, is moderate enough). If free-lance journalism is a profession, it carries none of the earmarks. You take what you are given. You like it or lump it.

There are journalists in New Zealand who regularly sell 2,000-word articles for a pound. They accept that rate because they have no choice in the matter. They are hard up, and need the money; and that is all there is about it. There are others who are paid more. But the general level is shockingly low. The freelance rates in Australia are from twice to six times as high as in New Zealand.

People who sell articles to newspapers and weeklies do it, in most cases, because (like everybody else) they have bills to pay and living expenses to meet. In any community that regards itself as being civilised, journalism is looked upon as a serious and an honourable profession, calling for the highest talents, and performing an essential service in the life of the nation. . . . And the free-lancer is granted his rightful place in journalism. I have no hesitation in saying that New Zealand doesn't treat its journalists—especially its free-lancers—fairly.

THERE is still another thing to be said about the position of the journalist in this country. Supposing all the writers were to get together and send a deputation to the Government, asking that all overseas periodicals should be forbidden to the country. . . . What sort of reception would they get? They could point out, quite truly, that their living depended on the sale of their work; and that the importation of overseas periodicals deprived them of work and income. But the request would be greeted with roars of derision, and by the whole-hearted antagonism of the reading public.

(continued on next page)