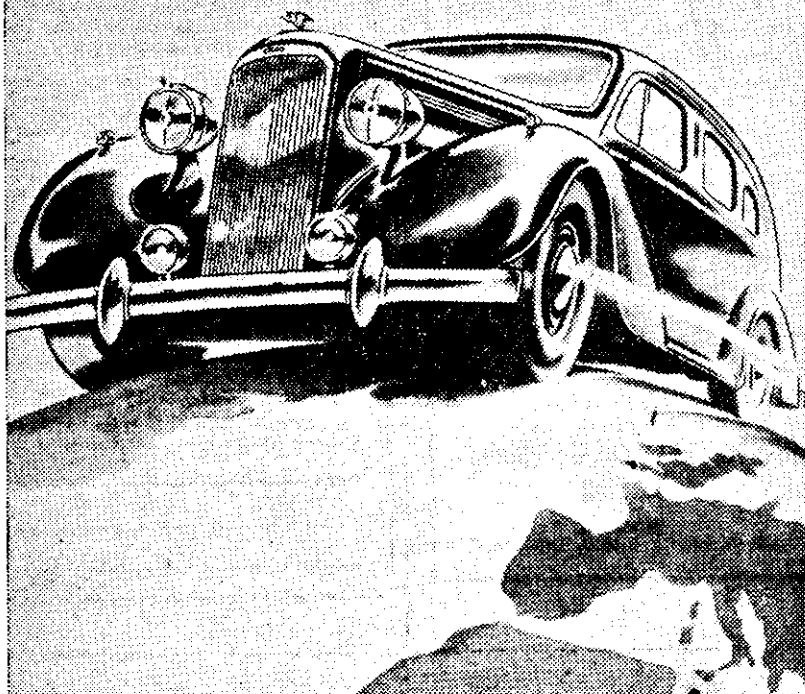


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46

O, TO BE IN NEW ZEALAND!

Confession of a Nonentity About to Remain at Home

Written for "The Listener"
by ELSIE LOCKE

IT is rather fashionable to speak of New Zealand as a sort of intellectual and cultural shingle-slide, on which stones predominate and a few miserable and monotonous plants retain a precarious existence, while the fine and original specimens are washed out and transplanted overseas. This is called Exporting our Best Brains.

We might make a conundrum:

Q. When is a Brain not a Brain?

A. When it stays in New Zealand.

But first, my qualifications to speak as a nonentity: To begin with, I am a New Zealander of the fourth generation and have never been abroad.

Second, although the adult part of my 33 years has been filled with activities educational, cultural, political, or concerning women's place in the community—all of this has brought me no personal distinctions.

Third, I am lamentably low-brow. I revel in good literature and enjoy good music, but I also like to walk and hear about such things as soil conservation, politics, world affairs, health, nutrition, schools, babies, women's organisations, clothes, gardening, recipes, and falling in love.

Fourth, I like New Zealand. I find it a joy and a stimulant to go about among our farmhands and the rugged majesty of our uncultivated spaces. And I like New Zealanders: well nigh all of them, yea, even unto the racehorse fans!

Fifth, although I would certainly appreciate a period in another land, to observe, to learn, and to look upon the faces of the mighty, I have never harboured any ambition to be Exported.

* * *

[T is just possible that a good many genuine Brains have felt similarly. Who shall be the judge? Who can say, for example, which have proved the Best Brains: James Bertram, and the late John Mulgan, whose admirable work was done abroad, or their contemporaries Allen Curnow and Denis Glover, whose energies have been given to fostering their native literature?

No, I am not trying to compare these with those, or to give anyone unstinted praise. Four men who have worked in such different spheres are quite incommensurable: as well endeavour to select a prize-winner from a named gladiolus and a twig of mountain rata. In the absence of any medical estimate of the grey matter, who shall provide a yardstick?

* * *

PERHAPS then, our intellectual barrenness is so complete that art, culture, science and even courtesy cannot

flourish, and the Brains are liable to atrophy?

I would be far from denying the large element of truth in the criticism with which we are regularly lectured. We are a very remote country, we have only a million and a-half inhabitants and we have been settled (except for the Maoris) for little more than a century. Who would expect another London?

So a sort of small-town consciousness may cause some of us to bewail the fact that all is lost and we are wallowing in a vegetative existence. But is this true?

No one has shown me any relevant statistics, but I am willing to wager that if it were possible to count up the people who take a lively and intelligent interest in art, music, drama, literature and science, and check the numbers per thousand of population, we would show up as well as our friends in England.

Naturally the aggregate number will be much less; we will not expect to find giants among them; many will live in remote farms. Even those in the towns, lacking exclusive quarters for their residence, will be forced to rub shoulders with common fellows who care for nothing but beer, races and gardening. But when I think of those tough Australian soldiers in tropical camps listening, entranced, to Beethoven played by a pianist on a truck—there may be hope even for the most lowly.

We can take courage in the faith that our inborn powers are no less than those of other humans. We do indeed require closer intercourse with world centres of culture: fortunately this is an age in which rapid transport is clearing away the back fences. Books and periodicals are strewn at our feet. Recording and radio have brought us the world's masterpieces played by the world's greatest musicians. "Canned music" maybe—but who among our grandmothers, no matter where they lived, could have sampled such a feast? Air travel will bring us visiting performers and enable some of us to attend exhibitions. Culture is becoming readily available to all of our people.

* * *

WE might do better to bemoan ourselves less, and to give more co-operation to those who are doing a practical job. We could afford to hear less of the critics and more of, say, our undaunted group of younger poets; of Ngaio Marsh and her student company, presenting Shakespeare to packed houses; of Dr. Vernon Griffiths training the symphony orchestra at Dunedin Technical College; of the Community Centres springing up all around us—yes, we are beginning to see a green carpet instead of that grey shingle-slide!

If our desire is for science, we might allow the late Lord Rutherford's memory to rest on his laurels, and learn more about the scientists in Otago who perfected the drug thiourea to deal with goitre; or about the agricultural research at Lincoln College and elsewhere; or