

WOOD ENGRAVINGS

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FOSTER PARENTS REAR GOOD CITIZENS

Social Experiment Over Half a Century

A SCHEME of boarding out with foster-parents children who have become "State wards" has been operating in New Zealand for just half a century. Representing *The Listener* I recently called in at the Wellington Child Welfare District Office to inquire how the plan had worked, was working, and was worked. Fortunately I encountered three young Child Welfare Officers just before they left for their day's rounds.

"We haven't been here long enough to tell you what sort of citizens all these boys and girls have turned into," one replied to my question. "It's the generation of officers before us who could tell you that. Those whom we personally have had as boys under our care are still only young fellows in their 'twenties."

"But if you think of some, they already haven't done so badly," cut in the second. "Think of Squadron Leader X. And of Y — he graduated Master of Science," he explained to me.

"And what about Z, our All Black," said the third. "Or Q, who was reckoned by the A Department to be the best cadet they ever had. He'll be settling our salaries next thing we know. Oh yes, and P who's training to be an Anglican minister."

"But are these typical cases?" I asked.

"In one sense, yes—in another, no," said the first officer. "Not everyone gets to the top of the tree—or looks like getting there. But the great majority

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by A.M.R.

of our boys make good at their trades or professions and as citizens in the community."

"Incompetent" Parents

"Not bad for delinquents," I commented.

"Hang on! Who's calling them delinquents?" the three exclaimed in varying words and varying tones of sorrowful indignation. Only a small proportion of the State wards who were boarded out in private homes could be so classed, they explained. Many more came under official care because they were "difficult"—meaning usually that they did not "hit it" temperamentally with their parents. Others again were completely normal children who had had to be taken from homes which had broken up or from parents who were incompetent.

"Incompetent," I repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Well," said one officer, "some people are feckless." Occasionally it's because they are feeble-minded. Occasionally it's because they are habitual drunks. But in the vast majority of such instances, as I sum them up, life has just got too much for them and they can't struggle against circumstances any more. Take the case, for example, of a girl who hates her home so much that she takes the first chance to escape from it into marriage. She's only a kid herself emotionally. And her husband, although he may be older, can't be much more emotionally adult or he wouldn't have married her. Both families disapprove the marriage and the young couple start it with no savings or solid friends. Soon they get tangled up financially. Then she has a second baby right on top of the first. She gets slovenly and snaps or moans at her husband, until he gives her up as a bad job and drowns his sorrows with his friends. She starts the same thing. The home becomes a bughouse and the children are neglected. Neighbours tell us or the police, and we see that to give those kids a chance we must put them into a different environment. There is nothing at all wrong with the children themselves. Only that they'll get like their parents if they stay where they are. And they carry no taint of any sort. Because their parents would really be quite decent themselves if they had been brought up decently and hadn't caved in under the weight of their circumstances."

"Difficult" Children

"But what about the children you called 'difficult'?"

"Well, in those cases," said the officer, "the home may be outwardly quite respectable. What has happened is that

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INADEQUATE or non-existent home-life is the prime factor in the growth of juvenile delinquency, according to a recent United States survey, from which the above photograph of idle and homeless youths is taken