

THROUGH NEW ZEALAND TO-DAY

(1) Over the Hills From Wellington

Written for "The Listener" by "SUNDOWNER"

IT was never easy to get into Wellington, and it is still not easy to get out. Getting in, we know, was too difficult for Tasman and for Cook, and getting out yesterday made the water boil in my engine. Even if you fly it is not easy to take off, and if your route is over the Rimutakas you are quite likely to be tipped sideways by a sudden gust of wind from below.

Still, if Wellington holds you physically as well as emotionally once it gets its arms round you, it lets you go a little more easily to-day than it did when it was younger. Without any hurrying I crossed the hill yesterday in 25 minutes. I think the first man over from the Wellington side—I mean the first white man, Robert Stokes—took nearly a fortnight. He certainly took so long that he decided to return round the coast; and that, although he improved his time a little, the journey was not quite a picnic either. As often as I can, I take my moral hat off to those run-holders who were moving stock from the Wairarapa to Wellington, and far further in the 1840's, rounding rocky bluffs between tides, and waiting on banks of flooded streams till there was a sporting chance for man and beast to swim to the other side. Their grandchildren are almost as far removed from the rest of us now as Mr. Churchill is from his gardener, but I gladly pay my tribute to the courage, the energy, the foresight, and the long-headedness of the first sheepmen ashore.

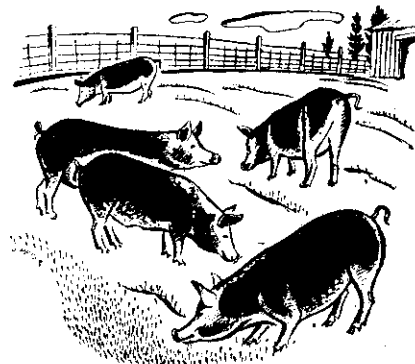
THE journey that took days, and sometimes weeks, then takes hours to-day, and when the men and machines now assembling on both sides of the mountain meet in the middle even the hours will be cut in halves. I passed one of the machines half-way down from the summit—I don't know whether it was a shovel, or a drag-line, or a bulldozer, but it had a row of eight wheels supporting it at the back—and I was astonished half-an-hour later to see it safely in Featherston. How it negotiated the bends and the one-car bridges I don't know, but it did, with only two men to direct it, and I have no doubt at all now that if it can climb over the Rimutakas it can drive through them. I have in fact no doubt that the lambs of 1950 will be filling their bellies with Wairarapa grass in the morning and freezing in Petone without their skins on the afternoon of the same day. Fortunately they won't know it themselves.

I ASKED a farmer in Masterton how many lambs the Wairarapa fattens every year. He made a silent calculation, then answered "About 600,000." A moment later he corrected his estimate to three-quarters of a million, and was even then afraid that he was "on the low side." Figures obtained since from the Meat Board suggest that his first guess

was the best, but I had no difficulty in accepting a few hundred thousand more after talking to a carrier in Martinborough who told me that from December till June he would be moving an average of 2,000 lambs a day. Most but not all of those lambs had already been born, he said, and he could therefore estimate pretty accurately how many he would have to handle; but he did not know what I meant when I asked if the job never worried him. It worried him all right, he admitted, trying to keep his trucks going all the time without a breakdown, and he often did not get much sleep. As for the purpose of his journeys, and the ceaseless flow of blood at the end of them, kind though he was, and intelligent, he had clearly never thought of such questions. Nor can I raise them with any decency as long as I eat meat, and gladly pay more for lamb than for mutton, and want to have two million countrymen before I die, with continuing high wages, security against sickness and old age, comfortable houses, good roads, and wider margins for leisure and culture.

IN any case, there are consolations in our national economy as well as ethical worries. If we are killing more animals than ever before in our history, lubricating the wheels with more and more blood, we are giving them all better lives while they last. I have seen hardly any pigs in old-time styes since I left Wellington, and not one up to its belly in muck. But I must have seen hundreds grazing in the open paddocks, free and contented and as clean as they wished to be, with no porcine worries at all except an early mutilation which they

A BETTER WORLD FOR PIGS



had long forgotten; and a horseshoe nail in their noses to discourage rooting. And that was not always present. I was so struck with the joy in life of 22 half-grown Tamworths near Featherston that I spent half-an-hour leaning over a gate watching them. Only dogs know how to make themselves as comfortable as pigs when they lie down—only dogs are as intelligent as pigs—and these Tamworths

THIS is the first of a series of articles about the New Zealand countryside that we hope to continue until the whole Dominion has been covered. During the war we had to neglect the country districts because of the difficulty of travel. Now we plan to give farms and farmers the same relative position in our columns as they hold in our national life—a difficult task, we know, but worth the effort. We cannot promise that there will be a country journey in every issue. Travelling still takes time and still costs money. But our representative will spend enough time in the country to see it as a visitor and not merely as a traveller, and he will see it through friendly eyes. As a rule there will be two or three articles about one district, followed at an interval of a week or two by two or three articles written somewhere else. That in any case is the plan, but plans often miscarry. All we can say with certainty is that it is the people of New Zealand our contributor is going out to observe, not their politics or party antagonisms. It is our hope that what will be finally presented will be a reasonably full picture of life in New Zealand to-day outside the leading cities.

had some tricks that I have not seen dogs reproduce. Dogs are too jealous to share the same beds, too suspicious to scratch one another, too proud to rest sleepy heads on one another's shoulders or flanks. But those pigs did all these things, romping about when they felt playful, flopping down when they were tired, basking full length in the sun, springing up suddenly and running into the shade when the sun got too hot, 22 of them sharing about an acre of young grass with only one little dispute in half-an-hour—and that caused by the attempt of a fourth sleeper to squeeze himself into a bed already comfortably filled by three.

No doubt they will all be pork in a month or two. But if the civilised part of me protests, the biological part rejoices that life has been made so good for them in the meantime, and so like a pigs' paradise when compared with the purgatories from which bacon usually came when I was a boy.

Twenty-two Tamworths
Basking in the sun.
Up came a motor-truck
And then there were none.

But life was never far from a picnic while it lasted.

AS this problem will crop up over and over again I may as well discuss it at once. Wherever you go in New Zealand, and I suspect in any country, you notice the alternation

RICH MAN— POOR MAN

of good fences and bad, good stock and poor stock, rich and impoverished pastures, well-kept and dilapidated buildings. It is not so marked in the Wairarapa as in most districts, but the contrast is always there. And in nine cases out of ten it is the contrast between poverty and wealth. A poor man can be a good farmer as a rich man can go to Heaven; but poverty is as heavy a handicap in one case as riches are in the other. I never pass along our roads without wondering whether farmers will not one day get so far in arrears with necessary expenditure

that profitable production will cease. I don't know how much fences cost to-day, but it can hardly be less than £400 a mile. I don't know what scrub-cutting costs, but I was told that it is now £2 an acre. Swamps can't be considered at all except in language that "small" farmers can't use. Gorse and blackberry have so firm a hold on second-class land that no one living will see it all clean again. A bad offender in spreading blackberry, a very intelligent farmer told me, is the Railway Department, which keeps weeds down on the railway track itself but allows blackberry to grow and flower and fruit on the side-banks, with disastrous consequences to the farmers over the fence. I don't know whether that is true or not, but it is obvious that if blackberry is allowed to fruit along the railway reserves birds will carry it into places where it will have a good chance of escaping detection until it is well established.

My point, however, is that whether it is blackberry or gorse or scrub or bad breeding or bad feeding that is keeping a farmer poor, poverty is a self-fertilising plant. When bad farming starts in a man's head there is no cure but another farmer of higher intelligence and stronger character. When it starts in his pocket it is no solution to say that he too should seek another occupation. I don't think we can afford that answer, though we at present make it. Nor can we afford scrub bulls and scarecrow cows, tumble-down fences and water-logged land, though we go on paying for them too.

I DON'T know why New Zealanders love darkness, but they do. It is not because their deeds are evil, since most of us are too respectable to have much to hide. Even the most consistent promoters of internal darkness—the proprietors of country hotels—have nothing worse on their consciences than a disposition to give drinks to the thirsty