

EROSION, CHILDREN, AND TUSsocks

INSTEAD of keeping to the excellent highway from Foxton to Marton I struck across country at Sanson and found myself before very long, but after much twisting and turning, running down into Halcombe. It is always a surprise to me that the primary roads should be so good in New Zealand and the secondary roads so faithful to the bullock-drivers who were our first engineers; but I've seldom seen a better example of this than in the network of local roads in the triangle between Feilding, Sanson, and Marton. However, I was glad I went to Halcombe, since it was there I met a young farmer who started 13 years ago with a wife and £500, and with her aid and that shallow cheque-book has converted one-sheep into five-sheep country and grown much wheat in addition.

WRITTEN ON THE WALL

"I've had some luck," he told me, "but the chief thing has been boldness in spending. When I took over this place it was half gorse, and I had to get rid of that. The soil was damp and sticky, so I had to drain. My fences were bad, and I was old enough to know that bad fences make bad neighbours. The pastures were old, and old pastures will not fatten lambs. There were times when we were living on about £90 a year, but we knew that we had to find money for fertiliser and lime."

"Without them you'd not have got through?"

"We would have had no chance at all. We had to spend to make."

"But mustn't you also get credit—find someone who will wait till the fertiliser does its job?"

"Yes, of course. But the firms will back you if they believe in what you are doing."

"If you were starting again to-day do you think you would get through?"

"Yes, but I should not like to be starting in 40 or 50 years."

"Why not?"

"Because the bottom is slowly falling out of farming, and I don't know how we are going to stop it."

"What is worrying you—labour difficulties or markets?"

"Something worse than either of them—erosion and the loss of fertility."

"But you have only flat and down country here. I have seen no erosion at all."

"You don't see it passing through, but the farmer feels it when he puts in a crop. The land is going back—partly because we are taking more out of the soil than we are putting it, but chiefly because so much of it is going out to sea."

"But this is grass country—some of the best I suppose in New Zealand."

"Yes, it is grass country, as good as anything anywhere, but we get a lot of rain and a lot of wind, and they are robbing us all the time."

"But there's not much cultivation."

"There is a fair amount. From 15 to 20 per cent. of this district comes under

the plough every year. But there can be erosion without cultivation—wherever there is mud, with sheep and cattle stirring it up. I haven't measured it, but I see the silt in my gullies after every rainfall, and I know what must happen in the end."

"Can you do anything?"

"We could plant more trees if we could afford to fence them, and some think that we could do more contour ploughing. I've no great faith in that myself, since most of the land here is heavy and damp, and we have difficulty enough in draining it now. Contour ploughing would make things worse."

"Is erosion your only worry?"

"Not by a long way. It worries me most because I don't know what to do about it, but farming is becoming so expensive in other ways that we will soon require 2/6 for wool and 2/- for butter to pay our way."

"I get the impression that most of your neighbours are prosperous."

"Prosperous in a way. Prosperous if they don't spend—don't buy tractors or repair fences or put up new buildings or pour in the lime and fertiliser. But that kind of prosperity doesn't last."

"On present prices, and present average standards of expenditure, it is possible to get through."

"Yes, and I think it will be for another generation. But the writing is on the wall."

I WAS driving along the Huntville-Taihape road when a sign flashed past me that I realised about 50 yards on was an invitation to tea. I find it one of the drawbacks of motor transport that the eye, mind, and body seldom function harmoniously when I have made up my mind that what I have just seen is a cow I have often come to a horse, and before I have decided that it is a horse I particularly want to see I am in line with some sheep or a Hereford bull. So I did not immediately stop, and when I returned the kind woman whose invitation had caught my eye before it entered my mind was watching me through a side window, and I think she must have put on the kettle the moment she saw me reduce speed.

WAYSIDE CONVERSATION

In any case she was waiting smiling behind her little counter when I entered, and in almost no time at all I was drinking hot tea and eating new-made scones with dairy butter and quince jelly. It was all so pleasant and so unexpected that I said I hoped the world knew about her.

"I'll say."

"You get lots of callers?"

"I'll say I do."

"You treat them all like this?"

It was impossible to answer "I'll say" to that, so she changed to "You're telling me," and I gave it up. As far as I could judge there had never been an American camp closer than 40 miles away, or a picture theatre nearer than 13 miles, but art happens and taste grows.

WHEN I came out of the textile mills at Foxton I thought I had seen everything that I had time to see in that town; but I was wrong. The gate of the factory is just across the road from the gate into the school, and for some reason or other I wandered in there too. I don't quite know what I expected to see, but what I did see astonished me. I had gone in at the wrong gate, and instead of entering the

TWO SCHOOLS



main school, found myself talking to the mistress in charge of the infant school, and at her invitation watching a hundred or more tiny tots learning to read, write, draw, and sing; to paint and model things; to wash their hands, brush their teeth, listen to stories, and even play at housekeeping. I don't want to suggest that they did all those things while I was there; but they did some of them; and I saw where they had left off doing the others and next morning would start again. I saw that they were happy—I am tempted to say all of them without exception; that they were understood; that the things which children don't do well—counting and spelling, for example—they were not being asked to do, and that the things that they have always wanted to do, and have always, given a chance, been able to do—painting, for example—they were doing with astonishing skill and imagination and delight. There was so much colour in their work and in their rooms, so much life, so much friendliness and fun, that for the rest of that day at least I was free of all the shadows my own schooldays still held over me and felt that I could at last look without pain at a child going to school for the first time.

A week later I found myself in a school of a totally different kind—a Native School 150 miles away—and

whether it was the influence of Foxton or the contagious smiles of the Maori children I was not depressed as I expected to be to think that all those boys and girls, if we had not got it into our heads that we must save them, would have been outside catching fish in the river or making spears or weaving mats or gathering maize or just basking in the pleasantly warm sunshine. I had never in my life before seen a Native School at work, or native school-teachers at work, and although my mind was full of obstinate questions I came away reasonably happy. There was the fact, to begin with, that the four teachers—three white and one Maori—were there because they wanted to be there, because they had affection for their pupils and faith in what they were doing and felt that they were opening doors to fuller, safer, and richer lives. No one knows better than they do what civilisation can do to Maoris.

"We are not blind," the headmaster told me, "or such donkeys that we have learnt nothing in 15 years. We know how thin the ice is on which we are walking, and have experiences every week that jolt and depress us. But we know the other side too—what would be happening if we were not here. Meanwhile the best indication I can give you of our confidence in our work is that we have been pleased to pass our own children through this very school. That fair one in front there singing with the others is our youngest."

I suppose, all in all, he was right. Even if it were desirable it is no longer possible to turn back the pages of history. The Maori can't go back to 1846, and not many in 1946 wish to. They wish to be New Zealanders, with the same cars and the same privileges as the Pakehas who share their country with them. Therefore they must go to school, acquire the skills, the standards, the morality of the white majority however they may choose to use them. I have never found it easy to think of Maori education without anxiety; but it is a comforting thought that if we don't always know what to do when we open a Native School we can still find teachers who will work in this missionary spirit.

THERE is an iron gate on the way to Huntville from Marton which is now drab and rusty but ought to be gleaming white. Then nobody could miss it or pass it unopened unless he were a motor robot.

AS WE WERE Pass through, and you are in New Zealand as it was hundreds of years ago—by the grace of God and the beneficence of Robert Cunningham Bruce. Bruce subdued the bush, but the bush also subdued him. When it came to clearing the last few acres his stomach turned and his conscience said No. Posterity should know what New Zealand originally was. He would

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