

# COMING ROUND THE MOUNTAINS

IT is surprising how long most of us live without ever realising what our country is like topographically. It is not so much the problem of seeing it whole

## THE LIE OF THE LAND

as of feeling it whole — knowing as we move about whether we are high up or low down, crossing a plateau or running down a long ridge, a hundred feet above sea level or fifteen hundred, on river-left shingle and silt or on the ashes and ground clinkers of volcanoes. I used to wonder when I was a boy how Cook knew what New Zealand was like, or found out merely by sailing round. I find some mysteries in it yet, and I still don't know how our early explorers and surveyors found a way through hundreds of miles of bush which usually turned out to be the best way.

It is easy enough to fly over bush-lands and get something like a proportioned view, but the surveyors travelled on foot and could only occasionally, and then with the most heroic struggles, get above the bush and look down.

Oddly enough I found this point of view appreciated when I was talking to a settler in Raetihi. The railway, he said, had taken the wrong route through the King Country. Instead of skirting the hills to the east it should have swept round in a curve to the west where there was good land to be opened up. "But there were no aerial surveys in those days. It's a wonder they got through at all."

I thought so too. And I thought as I motored over the Desert Road from Waiouru to Lake Taupo and from Lake Taupo back to the railway line again round the northern slopes of Ruapehu, Tongariro, and Ngauruhoe, with that sensational mass of gleaming snow dominating the scene all the way, that I was now for the first time seeing the very centre and summit of the North Island, and that far more than half of what remained was Ruapehu's footstool. It was an extravagant fancy, but nearer the truth than the formless mass the North Island had previously been, with the Waikato a world apart from the Manawatu, and Taranaki and Hawke's Bay independent of both.

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IT is not quite true that all boarding houses are the same—that an evening in Eketahuna is an evening in Raetihi and Ohakune and National Park; but if you have had one of those experiences you have established a kind of fellowship

## BOARDING HOUSE

with those who have had the others, and you'll have to be very careful or you'll find yourself being rushed into support or condemnation of prohibition. There should be no difference between a wet and a dry house outside the bar, but in nine cases out of ten you can see a difference hundreds of yards away, and when you enter it continues through

every room and follows you even into the bathrooms and lavatories. I am so near to total abstinence myself that I always feel a little ashamed in a licensed house, knowing that I am enjoying the radiance of alcohol without paying for it; but in an unlicensed house I feel sometimes that I am paying for experiences I would rather not have — that no one is genial or trusting or expansive or warm by day, and that the beds do not welcome me by night. I speak of course of those boarding houses that are in competition with hotels. There are boarding houses that would be hotels if they could be, and it is those you meet in the dry areas of the North Island.

They are not very exciting, but somehow or other let you know without saying anything that they are just waiting for "the day."

The programme goes something like this. You eat your meals with a little less resignation than everyone thinks it necessary to show in the houses that are unlicensed by choice. Instead of feeling grateful that your plate, if a little light, carries not one crumb from the table of publicans and sinners, you make open complaint of its contents or agree, if your neighbour resists you, that the proprietor is doing his best in the circumstances. If there is a commercial traveller at your table he will soon let you know that he is not there by his own wish, that the water at The Grand was always iced, the table napkins (he calls them serviettes) always of linen, the roast always tender, the coffee always pure (and served in the lounge), the cutlery always polished (and stamped; straight from Sheffield he assures you), the cheese always tasty, the nuts always fresh, and so on until he reaches the waitresses, when you freeze him off. Then having stretched your legs and smoked on the verandah or outside the front door you enter the sitting-room to find the commercial there before you, quite silent and a little solemn, ostentatiously checking his orders or writing a report, a bunch of young people round the piano, two women trying to turn each other inside out with their knitting needles, and an elderly farmer on the best chair by the fire, sleepy but suspicious, and looking round furtively after each lengthening doze to see if you are all still present.

At last the musicians have sung or played everything they know (with variations) and one by one tired and slipped out. The commercial has finished his reports and is doing his best to open conversation again on the subject of the hotels he has lived in, and the people and places he has seen. The two women have decided that each is rather common anyhow and are now knitting in silence. The farmer is asleep and snoring, and all that keeps you awake yourself are the commercial's questions—you

are determined to give him no information about your job or your friends or your social standing or your sports and pastimes, but he fights hard and you have to rouse yourself to beat him off. Then he suddenly gives you up, and takes his revenge by going to the only bathroom and staying there half an hour.



You know that all the hot water will be gone before he comes out, and that there will be none early in the morning. So he beats you after all. There is nothing you can do but go out of your way to be nice to him at breakfast time, and he meets you half way by blaming "these boarding houses."

"In The Grand, now, the water was always hot day and night. I've seen twenty travellers. . . ."

You agree at once in case you get it all over again, but wonder as you pay your bill why prohibition should expose you to all these risks.

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FIFTY years ago Raetihi was a track in the bush. To-day it is a prosperous town supporting about 1,200 people, with streets as wide as those of Melbourne, and a wonderful view of snowy mountains. It was exciting to see a real

## UNDER RUAPEHU

old-time saddler's shop there, packed to the ceiling with harness and spare parts, and two men working hard repairing riding saddles. But the real exhibit of Raetihi is Tom Shout, who works for the borough by day and is one of its rulers by night, is chairman of the local Acclimatisation Society, on the Water Conservation Board and the Board that controls the National Park (without meeting, he told me), but before anything and everything else is the most enthusiastic surviving worshipper of the mountain mass dominated by Ruapehu. I said "surviving" because Tom Shout would not like me to mention his name before that of T. A. Blyth, who made 146 ascents of Ruapehu and was "a great man." I gladly put that tribute on record from the man most competent to pay it; but I did not know T. A. Blyth, and I do now know Tom Shout, at least in part, and my difficulty is to set him down as he is without making him appear incredible.

I wish I could record as it happened the conversation I had with him in his own home, with the mountain blotted out by darkness, but occasional waves of his arm and an inclination of his head keeping it beside us all the time while he talked about it. We talked of other things too—of the early history of Raetihi, the big bush days and the big bush fire, and its now uneasy passage from pioneering to permanence; of acclimatisation matters, including his anxiety for the trout when Ruapehu was showering all the rivers and creeks with dust; of vegetable growing during the war, when

tons of beautiful carrots and cabbages were ploughed under the soil to the bewilderment, the indignation, and final deep sorrow, Tom assured us, of every man who had helped to grow them.

"Don't think that it was just a job. There was some of ourselves in those cabbages. We had put 9,000 plants in every acre. We had weeded and hoed them and watched them grow. I tell you that when the boss came and said that 31 acres would have to be ploughed in, and a day or two later 30 acres more, we felt that it was sabotage, and that is what I think still. There was sabotage by someone, but there was bungling too; and wreckers are always cunning."

"But was cunning necessary in this case? Was the war not enough, with its violent changes from day to day, and the whole machinery of production thrown out of gear?"

"Perhaps it was. I was only a labourer on the job, and the workers don't see much of the planning. But there were tears in the eyes of the boss when he ordered all that destruction, and some of us still feel bitter about it. But let us get back to the mountain."

This time we stayed on the mountain, not only for the rest of that night's talk, but for many other days and nights in which Tom was either climbing Ruapehu, or sleeping on it, or lying silent on it listening to one of its waterfalls, walking around its crater, or gazing at it from the plain below with a kind of constant intoxication, that had lasted for 24 years. He was not alarmed by last year's eruptions; he was just excited by them. "To think that all this was happening in our own day!"

So he returned again and again to watch and listen, and as he recounted his experiences I could not help recalling the Younger Pliny's account of the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D. and feeling moved myself as a New Zealander that a lad should have started life in a hairdresser's shop in Wellington and at 40 felt such a longing for the bush and the sun that he turned his back on cities for ever and became this mixture of poetry, tolerance, and genuine light that climbs mountains at 59 and often lies out all night listening for kiwis and other rare birds.

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IT was quite like old times, like the railway-route wars of my youth, the local rivalries and jealousies in which most of us grew up in New Zealand, to be warned in Tai-

## TWO OHAKUNES

hapa against the Para Para road into the King Country and to be told in Wanganui how foolish it was to take the Main Trunk road. There is of course nothing wrong with either road, or for that matter with any of our roads in New Zealand when we consider how short a time it is since they were bush tracks and how few we have always been who pay for them. Nor is there much wrong with good honest local prides and hates, local pushing and pulling, local blindness, local self-deception. Without those primitive passions and conditions not much would happen anywhere, and it is not very sensible to sneer at them and simultaneously base