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BIRD THOU NEVER WERT

*Being an Account of a Flight to Molesworth
Station for the Annual Round-up*

Written for "The Listener"
by ISOBEL ANDREWS

THE pilot and the cameraman were in front. I was in the back with the camera gear. The men had work to do. I was being taken for a ride. This was my first flight. The others were veterans.

"Poff," the pilot, ex-R.A.F., had been flying long before the war, had played a major part in evacuating civilians from Singapore, and knows all the Pacific bases as well as he now knows Blenheim.

The cameraman was a member of the National Film Unit, working on a story which needed some shots of the Awatere Valley.

We left Rongotai on a cold, clear, almost windless morning. If at the outset I was inclined to treat the expedition as adventure, the all-in-the-day's-work attitude, the polite showing-me-the-sights—"That's Kapiti," "There's the entrance to the Sounds"—brought everything down to the level of a conducted tour, and the strangeness and unreality of the first airborne moments soon gave way to at least a semblance of nonchalance. Nonchalance had a hard time of it though when, 5,000 feet above the sea, the door at my left elbow blew open, giving a very clear glimpse of a wing span and the deep, deep blue beneath. The opening of the door and the grabbing it shut were almost simultaneous. I gibbered slightly. The cameraman raised an eyebrow. The pilot laughed merrily—haha—and said, "That's nothing. You should have been in some of the crates I've known."

Feeling thankful I hadn't been near any of them, I took a deep breath and looking down saw that we were crossing the shoreline of the South Island. A moment more and the cameraman turned, looked at me, held his nose and pointed downwards. He would, it seemed, prefer it if I threw myself out of the plane. I didn't want to do this, so tried to look dignified instead. Then he said, "We're going to land. Hold your nose and blow out your eardrums." At least that's what I think he said, so I held my nose and blew until I must have looked like what I think a puff adder must look like when it puffs.

IT wasn't long before the patchwork quilt tidiness which is Blenheim was behind us as we sailed on towards the Kaikouras where snow had fallen the night before. We looked down on treeless gullies where the witch fingers of erosion had scarred and defaced the landscape by tearing into the hillsides and clawing at the cliffs and saddles.

Erosion was part of the story the cameraman was after, so we lingered, hovering over jagged grey-brown bleaknesses, dipping into desolate valleys, and then climbing up against the unwelcoming slopes. "Poff's" steady hand, his unpretentious concentration on the job in hand, the clarity of the sky and the eerie feeling of being part of space itself was sending the mind along paths of cliché-ridden philosophy which saw men like gods taking mountain peaks, winds, time, and space within the

narrow boundaries of their hands, and conquering them all by the power of their will.

We sailed down a gully and up again. A slight inward disturbance took the mind off higher things and presented it with the fearful thought that there was such a state as airsickness. Since I was desperately determined to show that wimmin can take it, the ensuing battle of mind over matter was memorable and fairly prolonged. At the right moment the cameraman once more turned and held his nose. "Poff" landed the plane on a tussock-covered river flat near a lorry which was waiting to take us on down the valley to "Molesworth" station. Molesworth was the main theme of the story which the cameraman was working on.

MOLESWORTH is Crown Land, first leased as far back as 1850. The old homestead, a small house of mud walls, is still in use as a rabbit's hut and further down the valley the "new" house stands. Sixty-five years old, built also of mud, it is a picturesque, low-lying building, verandah sided, with a long straight passage leading from front to back, lined with spacious, pleasant rooms which Bill and Mrs. Chisholm, the present station manager and his wife, have in their four or five years of residence converted into a more than comfortable home.

Fifty years ago Molesworth flourished, carrying more than 50,000 sheep on its windswept quarter-of-a-million acres. Eight years ago the last lessees walked off, saying that nothing more could be got out of the land. The hills were barren, there was little vegetation, shingle slides had swallowed up whole faces, the rabbits had moved in, and deer had devastated the uplands. The native tussocks and grasses which for thousands of years had been built up by the interaction of climate, soil, and vegetation had almost disappeared in less than 80 years of burning and overgrazing.

The gradual rehabilitation of these vast stretches of neglected territory is now in the hands of the Lands and Survey Department. Already, under scientific and patient nursing, the tussock is again showing signs of life, blue grass is flourishing, in the damper areas cocksfoot and white clover have started to take hold. The rabbits and the deer are being dealt with, and the 3,000 head of cattle which have replaced the sheep are showing a profit even at this early stage of the game.

ONE of the most spectacular innovations now being tried out at Molesworth is the use of the aeroplane. Hitherto, anyone wanting to go from the station to Blenheim had to contemplate an 80-mile journey in a lorry over a bumpy road which crossed the river about 27 times and which in wet weather was a chancy business at best, owing to

floods and mud holes. Now, a flight of an hour will get people and packages to Blenheim. Then, at round-up time, when every head of cattle has to be accounted for, and when men go out into the mountains for periods of a fortnight to three weeks in search of them, it is considerably easier to round up the strays after an aeroplane has first reconnoitred, has spotted a herd, and has dropped a note telling the seekers where to look.

WE had lunch in the hospitable farm kitchen with Bill and Mrs. Chisholm and Bruce, aged two, but looking three. The homestead, even to-day and with an aeroplane thrown in, seems still, to a town dweller, a very isolated and lonely spot. It must have been more so in 1850 when the first settlers made their claim and built their little mud hut. A woman's work now, in the bigger house with its larger rooms and airy kitchen, its organisation which brings flour and soap and candles and sugar at regular intervals by lorry and by plane, its once-a-week mail service, its radio, its telephone, its fairly frequent visitors, is still heavier than that of a woman who lives near shops and tram-lines. And although life in 1850 must have been simpler in essentials, there was always the threat of sudden illness with no lorry, no plane, no telephone, no direct contact with the outside.

What did they have, the men and women of 1850, which made them go to any given spot on any isolated and potentially unfriendly piece of land, and say, "This is where we will build our house. This is where we will live for the rest of our lives"? There must have been an acceptance of the future which is now lost to us.

WHILE Mrs. Chisholm was preparing lunch and I was firing questions at her, which she answered with the maximum of patience and good humour, the men had once more gone in the plane in an endeavour to locate some of the 400 head of cattle which were still at large. They discovered some in an out-of-the-way gully, and when it was time for us to return we were asked to drop a note to the men who were out on the ranges looking for them.

So, once up in the air again, instead of heading north, we headed south, sailing over gaunt snow-trimmed peaks, looking down into deep ridged valleys, where rocks, landslides, and a few stunted indistinguishable bushes were the only relief. The air was much colder now. The plane every so often went down an odd 500 feet or so, very suddenly, like being in a lift when someone presses the button and you're not looking.

ALL at once, for me, interest changed to a feeling of tension. We seemed to be making nowhere fast and a particularly jagged mountain peak appeared to have been in the same place for a long time. These crags were no longer picturesque, but menacing. They could so easily be something to crash into rather than to fly over. The men in front were calm enough and "Poff"

NEW ZEALAND LISTENER, NOVEMBER 22