Through New Zealand (VIII)

SUN IN THE ATTIC

By "Sundowner"

MOST New Zealanders know what it is to live in two worlds in one day. South Islanders do it as often as they pass through the Otira tunnel. It happens to North Islanders, though not quite so dramatically, when they traverse the Manawatu gorge. Wherever there is a high range running north and south you get one set of conditions on the west side and another on the east side. It was never more than a question of hours, and to-day, when we fly, the transition is often a matter of minutes. When I was a boy a journey of five miles took me from Scotland to Palestine. It lasted about two hours, but the change never ceased to astonish me: grey skies, rain, fertility, bleakness; then blue skies, rocks, heat and drought. It had always been like that, and I can think of nothing in posterity's power that will alter it.

TWO WORLDS

But with all those experiences to prepare me I was not ready for the change when I reached North Auckland. It was not dramatic at the time, or for some days after. I had spent over a week on the journey from end to end of the North Island and could easily have believed, the day I reached Whangaroa, that I had come on a cold day to Picton or Havelock. The sea was rough, the water on the mudflats was dirty, there was nowhere either beauty or warmth or rest. But when I had lingered a little longer there, and been across to the other coast, and seen the mangrove swamps in hot sunshine, and slept under the kauris in Trounson Park, I knew that the New Zealand to which I thought I belonged ended at Auckland and that I had lived all my life in a house with an attic and had never ventured to climb the stairs.

Northland is no more New Zealand, the New Zealand that most of us know, than the Channel Islands are England or the Orkneys Scotland. The people are New Zealanders so far, but the day will come when they too will be different and will make entries in the ledger that Southerners will find it hard to understand. They are beginning to change already, chiefly because it is never cold, but partly because they are never far from a Maori pa. For we deceive ourselves if we think (1) that the Maori will remain a Maori, (2) that he will die, (3) that he will disappear and leave no trace. He will remain in New Zealand throughout all imaginable time, not only blackening our eyes and browning our skins, but putting courage and poetry and patience into our minds for generations after the pakeha thinks he has absorbed him. He is at work already in Northland teaching us the folly of go-getting. I don't know where laziness begins and philosophy ends, but it is elementary that the man who has no time to stand and stare is not a grown man at all. He is a mental child or a social or economic robot, trained to pursuits that bring him no joy, accumulating litter that he can neither absorb nor carry away. Job called him what he is—a fool—and every Maori agrees with Job. Every Maori in Northland is at work on every Pakeha—despised and rebuffed just now, but aided by the climate, the pests, the generally poor soil, and the physical indolence that Puritanism can never quite kill, in slowing the white man down, humbling and humanising him and making him more accessible to wisdom. If the Northlander of 2046 laughs at the Northlander of 1946 it will be partly because there are brown genes in his cells and some brown sense developing in whatever he then calls his mind.

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BUT I am in 1946, looking for summer in a November that every Northlander tells me he has never "seen the like of" before. I have no difficulty at all in believing him, though I have had rain or gales or both two days in three since I left Hamilton, and have slept every night under three heavy blankets. Only twice have I found it warm enough to lie half-naked in the sun, and only once have I had to bother about mosquitoes. In any case the evidence of years makes nonsense of the evidence of days, and even if there were men living who could remember 20 Novembers as cold and wet as this one, the evidence of centuries would silence them.

NO HISTORY

One substantial piece of that evidence confronts me as I write this note, a big tree in Waipoua forest whose bole is 43 feet round. A mile or two away there is a tree whose bole is nearly half as big again, and there is evidence in the possession of the Lands Department that there was a tree once in the Tutamoe forest whose circumference was 66 feet and whose first branch was more than 100 feet from the ground. I understand that this means nearly a quarter