

# HOKIANGA INTERLUDE

FIFTEEN miles north from the northern fringe of the Waipoua forest you come on a steep hill—so steep that I had to change down two gears instead of one—but when you get to the top

## IN THE BEGINNING

you are looking at New Zealand's first few pages. So, anyhow, I was assured when I dropped down on the other side, and I had neither the means nor the inclination to verify. I was quite satisfied to be told that it was on a little beach below me and to the right that Maning first landed and wrestled with the young Maoris for pakeha prestige. It was the kind of place where it all should have happened if it didn't. Besides, Maning's great-grandson, an arrestingly handsome young man with straw-coloured hair and dark eyes, appeared on a launch a day or two later and ferried us over the harbour. That was evidence which I could not question. Nor did I question the loyal Catholics who told me that Pompallier held his first mass on the other side of the stretch of water below me, and invited me, when I crossed over, to walk two or three miles off the road to the plinth that now marks the very spot. I accepted that story, and I was at least in the mood to accept the further story of the Maoris that Hokianga was Kupe's first landfall in New Zealand.

I accepted all those statements and several others the purpose of which was to convince me that history began in Hokianga and not 40 miles away in Kororareka. I felt that it must have happened to those others as it happened to me and I feel sure happens to everybody who looks down on Hokianga harbour in calm sunshine: they would not find it easy to go on. I drove down the hill intending to stay three or four hours. I stayed four days, and have been looking back ever since. It is true that I found friends there, of whom I shall speak later; that the weather was the best I've had in the North Island; that it was a novelty to me to get so close to the Maoris; that I had spent too many days driving on bad roads and camping in wind and rain. Many things in addition to its own natural appeal held me in Hokianga, but Hokianga itself came first.

I don't think anyone can realise today what New Zealand was like when Maning arrived. I am sure no one can realise what Hokianga harbour was like, and it is just fantastic to try to think what Kupe saw. It is, I think, doubtful if we could now enjoy such a paradise as the whole of North Auckland must have been when Cook first came, and I don't really wish I'd seen it. But I wish I'd seen Hokianga about 50 years ago, when its noblest trees were still standing, and sailing-ships still came freely in and out. That would not have been too remote from the experiences I had three weeks ago, and would have made some things live that now seem dead. Next to that I should have liked to see it 30 years ago, when Dr. G. M. Smith arrived with his wife to make Rawene a place of pilgrimage to-day and a legend to-morrow.

I DON'T know how old Dr. Smith is to-day, but he is no longer young. I don't know how tall or how heavy he is, but he still towers above average men

G. M. SMITH

and walks the floor with a long swinging stride in which the feet neither thump nor shuffle. I never saw socks on his feet or a tie round his neck and it astonished me once to see his head hidden in a hat. His hair has left his forehead and dome, but still hangs in a mane at the back of his neck.

To-day he drives a heavy car which circumstances compel him sometimes to speed. But for something like 20 years he travelled on horseback, accompanied usually by Mrs. Smith, who not only rode with him as companion, but gave the anaesthetic at operations. It was not unusual for both of them to be in the saddle eight hours in 24, to ride all night, and then, before they or their horses had rested, find themselves called out again. They always went, even when the weather was so bad that the patient might have to wait on one side of a flooded stream while they waited on the other side. It was Grenfell of Labrador in a sub-tropical setting with mud taking the place of snow.

Horse days are over, but the work goes on. Though, cars reduce distance they multiply the possible calls, and Dr. Smith is not sure whether it is progress or retrogression that he can now attend to three or four times as many patients as he could see a few years ago.

"When they had to come over the hills in a sledge," he explained, "they really were sick. So all my time was given to the people who needed me most. Now half the community are what we call health-conscious, meaning of course guts-conscious, and the doctors are too busy driving those away to be able to attend to the few who are in real trouble."

"You don't believe in health education then?"

"Not in health mis-education. A man knows when he is sick, and when he doesn't know he doesn't need the doctor."

That is the way Dr. Smith talks. His practice is to see everybody who wants to see him and to give all his knowledge and skill to the most unworthy applicant. He has never been known to refuse a call, day or night, and fees don't interest him. It is doubtful if he earns a quarter of the income flowing into the pockets of men of comparable experience in private practice, though he has a Dominion reputation—I have heard that it is wider still—in prostatic surgery and midwifery.

"What the hell is money?" he asked me, in a tone of voice that was almost an accusation. "Go to Auckland and see how they get it—taking one another down. It is not money we need but a new standard of values."

I heard a good deal about that new standard while I was in Rawene and was lucky, I think, not to be prescribed a course in philosophy. Dr. Smith recognised, I imagine, that I would have been a bad patient and pupil, but I await with interest the new book I understand he has written. I have not met anyone else in New Zealand more likely to give philosophy the pungency it must have if it is to interest those of us who can't read text-books. He was continually making remarks like this to provoke me:

"It is more important to be interesting than to be true. Truth is relative—fluid. It changes with our knowledge and our circumstances: There is no such thing as absolute truth—Carlyle's eternal verities were damned rot. But there is an absolute and eternal necessity to interest men and women if you want them to listen to you."

He did not succeed in provoking me, and I don't think he quite realised that what he said to me was what every journalist has said to himself in effect since Defoe; but he interested me, and I could not help thinking that a good deal happened to New Zealand the day George McCaw Smith left Scotland for New Zealand and brought his wife Lucy to Hokianga.

ONE thing that happened was the creation of the first co-operative medical service operating throughout a whole county. This has been in existence for more than five years, and is now therefore a little more than an experiment. I spent three days on the Kohu Kohu side of the harbour watching how it worked and came away full of lay enthusiasm. I must point out, too, that Dr. Smith was not with me. During those three days I did not once see him or talk to him by telephone or communicate with him in any other way. I did not



"When you get to the top you are looking at New Zealand's first pages"

even read the notes and pamphlets he had given me explaining why the service had been established; nor have I read them yet. I shall read them when this note has been written, not before, since it must be my note and not his.

My point of course is that the service is Dr. Smith and that Dr. Smith is like Gawn Hamilton in *Holy Willie's*

## CO-OPERATIVE MEDICAL SERVICE

Prayer—master of so many devilish arts, when he likes to call on them, that eternal vigilance is your only safeguard if you hope to speak with your own tongue and see things with your own eyes.

So I kept Hokianga harbour between us when I called at his clinics and went with his colleague, Dr. Kemble Welch, on visits to the Maori and pakeha sick whom the nurse thought bad enough for him to see. Some of these journeys were made by day and some by night, nearly all over outrageous roads which the nurse had already taken in advance. For it is an essential part of the service that the nurse should be more than the "doctor's handmaiden." Dr. Smith believes that if you make her job responsible enough and adventurous enough you will get the kind of nurse such work demands; and the facts are on his side so far. I saw only one of his nurses at work, and if the other five are of the same type—well-educated, poised, courageous, and endlessly patient—it can hardly be long before the other counties of North Auckland are clamouring for the service supplied to Hokianga, and all the people of Northland are keeping themselves healthy on their social security payments.

But that is going a little too fast. So far I am still with Dr. Welch, visiting clinics at appointed hours, holding consultations with the nurse, or driving away at a telephone call over a road on which the risks are about equally divided between going over the bank, meeting a milk or timber lorry head-on, or smashing something vital in your under-carriage. Wherever he goes Dr. Welch is greeted as a friend—he is usually hatless, coatless, and tieless—and when he gives them time the Maori children run down to the road and wave to him. But sometimes he has to leave his car and climb up hillsides or descend

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