

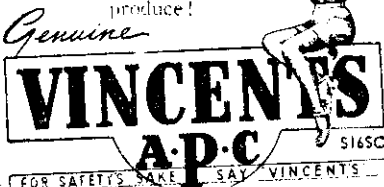


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SCIENTIST IN THE SOVIET

The Russians are Friendly

PROFESSOR ERIC ASHBY, D.Sc., of London, lately professor of botany at Sydney University and now on his way to Manchester, had plenty of time to explore Auckland during the six weeks his ship, the Sydney Star, was lying about the docks fuming at the hawsers—or whatever it is ships do when they are delayed for six weeks in one port. With Professor Chapman, of Auckland University College, Professor Ashby visited Waipoua forest and other places of particular botanical interest; he recorded three talks at 1YA (scheduled to be heard from that station on Monday, January 20, at 7.15 p.m., and on two successive Mondays, and later from the other national stations); he explored Auckland shops and found their goods expensive, especially the fruit; and for part of the time he escaped from his too steadfast Sydney Star to a beach cottage that was lent him and his wife and their two sons, Michael, aged eleven, and Peter, who is nine. Both were born in England but they both, Professor Ashby says, speak "dinkum Aussie."

"The boys have had a grand time all round in Auckland—especially at the beaches where they've been swimming without worrying about sharks for the first time in their lives." Professor Ashby said the two or three fatalities every year in Sydney certainly kept people worrying; I asked him if he had ever seen a shark.

"You don't see a shark. You see a fin and then you go rapidly out of the water; it's safe enough bathing in crowds, but the danger is on quiet beaches—they've been known to drag away a child who was paddling; so you see they will come into quite shallow water."

PROFESSOR ASHBY was trained at London University and held various lecturing posts in England and America; he worked on a Commonwealth Fund grant at Chicago University and spent some time at the desert laboratory of the Carnegie Institution in Arizona where he wrote a book and drank a lot of Mexican tequila. In 1938 he went to Sydney and now he is to be professor of botany at Manchester University. He said he is glad to be going there:

"There are in Manchester ten endowed chairs of botany and that means that each professor has time to think and to do research work—he isn't forced to draw all the time on his intellectual capital. Last year at Sydney I had 1300 students in first-year botany; with numbers like that you simply have no time for original thinking and sooner or later you feel that you are getting on the intellectual breadline. I'm glad to be going to Manchester too because it is the home of the Halle orchestra—it's the home of good art all round." The entry on Professor Ashby in *Who's Who*

ends:—Recreation: chamber music. In Australia he played the violin in quartets—but not in public: "It's not fun any longer once you play in public," he said.

DURING the war Professor Ashby added considerable war work to his teaching duties; he conducted an inquiry for the Government on the enlistment of scientific resources in war and became director of the Scientific Liaison Bureau—its task was to deal direct with the armed services and farm out their scientific problems to the right scientific departments and institutions all over Australia. Then in 1945 he was sent as scientific attaché to the Australian legation in Moscow.

"How did such an appointment come about? It seems an unusual one to us in New Zealand."

Sifting the Glamour

"Well, it is unusual. What happened was that the various scientists I was working with in Australia were always reading, as we all do, glamorous reports of scientific developments and so on in the Soviet; and the Australian scientists were always asking, as all scientists must be, just what there was in this report



PROFESSOR ERIC ASHBY

or that. So it seemed a good idea to the government that a scientist should go attached to the legation to get a first hand bearing on science to-day in Russia. It was no use asking a diplomat to look round because he wouldn't know what he should look for. Besides, a diplomat in Russia can't look round—he's like a sacred bull in an oriental country and there are more formalities for him to observe than you can imagine. Well, I was chosen to go and for a time after I arrived I saw nothing and visited no universities or scientific establishments. I was still reading the glamorous accounts of scientific developments that the whole world was reading, and I was still being quite unable to sift the

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