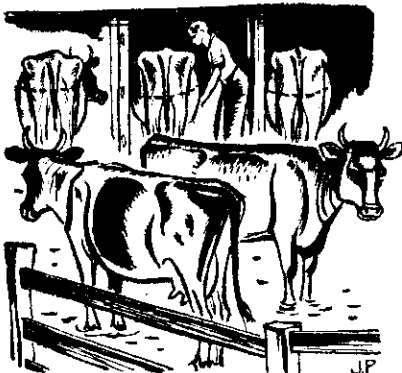


FROM SEA TO SEA

FROM Thames to Raglan as a gull flies may be a little more than 50 miles. As a car goes it is approximately 100 miles and, with the exception of some rough hills near the West coast, is one big dairy farm. There is no doubt in the minds of its occupiers that it is the most important farm in New Zealand, and it is easy to believe that it is the richest. It may even be true, as I was told in a hotel at Te Aroha, that the triangle joining Paeroa, Matamata, and Hamilton produces one-third of the Dominion's total income. It would be a tedious business to check a claim like that, and profitless to prove it wrong—like plumbing our legion of bottomless lakes. If believing that they are bottomless makes us more reverential New Zealanders, the balance is on the profit side if we go on believing it; and if by taking the necessary trouble I made it clear that the income of that big farm is not a third of our total but only a fourth or a fifth or a sixth, my labours would not be appreciated in the rest of the Dominion, and would smell like forgotten fish all the way from Paeroa to Cambridge.

Fortunately there is nothing in me that ever wishes to question local enthusiasm. I accept it at its face value, and if it wears a little thin later I know that it has served its original purpose of delivering somebody from pessimism. I know, too, that records are achieved at a price. They might think in a hotel that Thames-Waikato grass turns to gold; as it does. But I heard something of the cost of the transmutation from a woman in a motor camp.

With her husband and her son she was milking 96 cows a few years ago. But she was on the plains where the ground was always wet in winter. The cows came into the shed caked with mud, and mud was their bed when they lay



down at night. So they "blew out" as she put it, in three years, and cost on an average £10 to replace.

"You didn't breed your replacements?"

"Yes, we did that, too, but you often get caught short. Besides it is no joke rearing calves. I usually kept about 40, and took a lot of trouble with them. But men won't help a woman with calves."

"Why not?"

"They think it's women's work. Anyhow they hate calves. Most of them hate cows too. I had to go to the sheds every day to keep the peace. The cows

were on their nerves and my husband told me that if I didn't come down and help there would be murder some day. So of course I went."

"And did your house-work too?"

"Yes, the house and the calves. You know what it is on a dairy farm—meals at all hours, with house-cleaning, sewing, and mending when you can find time. I was in the sheds twice a day washing udders and teats. I bailed all the calves at feeding time, so that the greedy ones would not rob the others. I cooked and scrubbed and darned and patched, and then crawled into bed tired out."

"You would at least sleep well."

"Sometimes I did and sometimes I didn't. You can be too tired to sleep. But the boys often fell asleep half-way through their tea."

"In the end you broke down?"

"Only when my boy went to the war and got killed. We struggled on a bit longer, but it was hopeless."

"You could not get labour?"

"No one could during the war, but dairy-farmers never can. I've been away from it now for three years and don't feel so bitter about it, but those cows nearly drove us mad."

* * *

THAT was one encounter on my sea-to-sea journey (which, though a good car would do it in three hours, took me 10 days). Here is another, set down just as it happened.

I passed a man not far out of Thames cutting buttercups with a scythe, and went back to talk to him.

IF THEY LEAVE US ALONE

Was this an annual business, I asked, or something new? I was a South Islander, and had never seen anything like it before.

"What part of the South Island?"

"Canterbury and Otago."

"That's dry, isn't it? You won't get buttercups where it's dry."

"Yes, fairly dry. Twenty to forty inches of rain. How much do you get here?"

"I don't know, but I think twice as much."

"Do you need a lot of rain here?"

"Well, we do and we don't. Too much rain makes a bog of it again. But if we get no rain at all for a month or two we get into a very bad way."

"Is it permissible to ask what land here is worth—not your farm, but land generally in this district?"

"Well, I gave £60 for this some years ago. It's worth about the same to-day."

"It's good land that is worth £60."

"This is good land."

"Yes, I can see that. Do you have to help it out a bit?"

"Top-dress?"

"Yes."

"Of course. Everybody top-dresses. But we can't always get enough to put on."

"Do you need extra feed in winter?"

"Yes, it's cold in winter, and the paddocks are pretty bare. But we have to make hay or ensilage at this time of year to get rid of surplus growth."

"So your winter feed is not altogether an extra?"



"It's extra labour, but if we ran enough stock to eat all the grass in summer, they'd starve in winter."

"All in all you get through pretty well. There's not much wrong with dairy-farming on country like this."

"Only mortgages, and I don't keep one."

"Been all your life here?"

"Here and round about. I was born in Thames. My grandfather came there from Cornwall."

"A miner?"

"Not here. He went into the carrying business."

"Then bought land?"

"A little."

"Which your father made a little more?"

"Yes."

"And now you have this beautiful farm without a mortgage. You're on top of the world."

"I'm all right if they leave me alone."

"But nobody can touch a man without a mortgage."

"The Government can."

"You mean tax you more?"

"I mean take my farm."

"Oh, I see. You're worried about that, are you?"

"Not worried perhaps, but watching them."

"Are your neighbours watching them too?"

"Some are and some are not. A lot of them have mortgages."

"Well if I owned your farm I don't think I would lie awake worrying about it."

"Have you ever owned a farm?"

"No."

"A business then?"

"No."

"Do you own your own house?"

"A very small one."

"Nothing else?"

"Not much more. Nothing that you would mortgage your farm to buy."

"I wouldn't mortgage it for anything."

"Neither would I if I owned it. But I wouldn't mortgage my sleep either worrying about it."

(continued on next page)