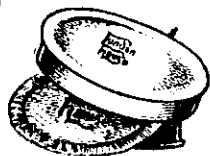


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Through New Zealand (XVIII)

By "SUNDOWNER"

AND THE GREEN GRASS GROWS ALL AROUND

ONE of our troubles in New Zealand is that for every acre of first-class land we have ten acres that are second, third, fourth, or fifth-class. It is our climate and not our soil that is our fortune, but we find difficulty in accepting that fact. It hurts us to think that so much of our land is hungry, so we don't think it.

SUN, RAIN, AND GRASS

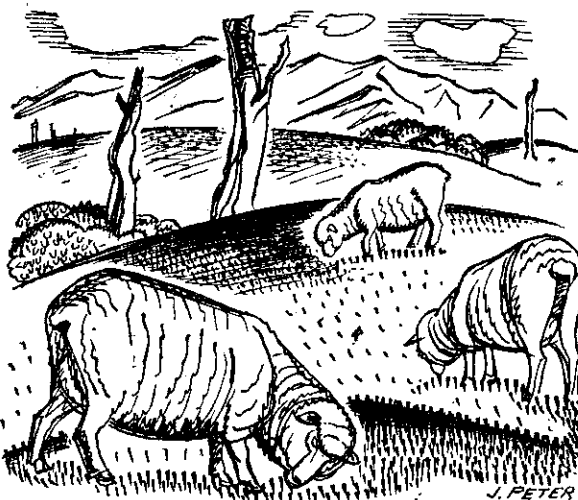
We turn clay into soil, and occasionally rocks and water too, but we contrive somehow not to see the landscape as it is.

But so far as the East Coast is concerned, I had never seen it at all. The triangle whose apex is East Cape and base the line joining Gisborne and Opoitiki was entirely new country to me. I had never been nearer than 50 miles as a bird flies from any of it, and I entered it with great expectations. Three weeks there made me wish to stay longer, and I still think of it as, all in all, the most fortunate corner of New Zealand: beautiful to look at, delightful to live in, warm, sheltered facing the sun, never monotonous if you are a land-lubber, exciting if you love the sea, sheep country, cattle country, fruit country, with mountains, real rivers, bush, and almost African nights. But it is not rich country except to the spirit.

It has made men rich, whole families of them for three generations, but their pockets have been kept full by grass, sheep and cattle feed, not by wheat or oats or butter or cheese or maize or potatoes or fruit, which men themselves eat and require good soil to grow. They do of course produce most of these crops in small quantities, some of them in fairly big quantities, but grass is the steady crop, the well that fluctuates but never fails, the builder of the beautiful homes, nine of the ten reasons for the confident, hospitable, cheerful, exceedingly friendly people. And grass will grow on poor soil. If it grows better where the soil is sweet and rich, it does not refuse to grow on clay or shingle or sand if regular showers fall and the thermometer rises above 60 ten times as often as it falls below 50. That is what has been happening to the East Coast since Maui hooked it out of the sea. It has had fires and droughts and hurricanes and frosts now and again; but nine years in ten, and 19 centuries in 20, it has not only been first into the sun, but often enough in the warm and soaking rain to keep the bush growing or the scrub or the grass, whether man has helped or hindered. And man has of course done both. He has murdered the bush, but he has made ten thousand blades of grass

grow where one grew before, and they have been growing steadily for a hundred years.

But now, after all that beneficence, the farmers are beginning to be worried. The grass does not grow so fast or so recklessly as it did. Acres that once fed two sheep now feed one, and every second man I spoke to asked me if it was fair that the rest of the Dominion could get lime and fertiliser at a little more than their cost at the works while East Coast farmers either could not get them at all or had to pay so much for transport that the land could not carry the burden. When I asked if they had not had some compensating advantages, cheap land and the world's best climate,



"Grass is the steady crop."

they countered by asking how I would like loading wool through the breakers for 50 years, spending as much as a week on the short journey to Gisborne whether I went by water or by land, seeing my children once a year when they came home from school, often half dead with the journey, still cooking with wood and reading by oil, and having to travel 30 miles to see a doctor.

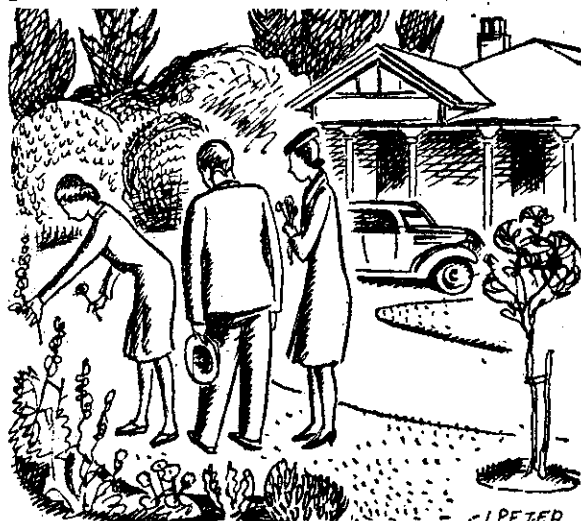
It would have been humbug to reply that I thought I would count civilisation well lost for other delights; so I said nothing. But I felt like saying something as foolish as that, and it is difficult not to be foolish on a March morning anywhere between Gisborne and Opoitiki, to remember the drawbacks of isolation when the mist is rolling up out of a valley lined with poplars and dotted with weeping-willows, when there are still dew-drops and long shadows on the grass, and you can hear a tui in a puriri tree not many yards away.

THE best land I saw on the East Cape was the half-moon of fertility surrounding Gisborne. I don't know what that land is worth to-day, but I understood the attitude of the owner who told me that no price would tempt him but that the Poverty Bay Flats would be

GOOD LAND AND BAD

cheaper at £100 an acre than any other land in New Zealand at £50. I don't think

he had been anywhere else for more than a day or two, but his confidence was more than mere parochialism. He had a paddock of maize about eight feet high and as level at the top as at the bottom: one of the finest sights of its kind I had ever seen. But even on those flats I saw relatively poor land, not so much cold and wet as sour, and likely to remain sour for a long time. I saw grass that would feed more than a cow to the acre; but I saw some paddocks where a cow on three acres would be hungry unless she filled herself with straw. And it was the same all round the Coast. I saw rich flats here and there that it would be nonsense to value in money. Only fools would sell them, and only the men who own them know how much better they are than they look to the covetous eyes of strangers. But much of the Coast is second-rate land or worse. It may be true that it could be "made" first-class artificially, forced into feeding three or four sheep where it now feeds one. But it is £8 to £10 land to-day until you get right round to Opoitiki, and even there the area of first-class land is limited. I talked to a man about half-way between Ruatoria and Hicks Bay who told me that the market value of his property to-day, with his fences, buildings, and modern home thrown in, was a little more than half the price he gave for it barely 25 years ago. On the other hand it was pleasant to see a soldier settlement on downland behind Opoitiki which had been bought for £12 an acre 20 years ago and was now worth twice as much. When I remembered some of the soldier settlements I had seen, and others I had heard about, I could not



"Gardens and lawns serve both as art-galleries and morale-builders."