

AN IRISHMAN SEES THE ISLANDS

(And 2YA Plays Him a Trick)

ROBERT GIBBINGS, the Irish author and engraver of "Lovely is the Lee," "Sweet Thames, Flow Softly," "Coming Down the Wye," and other books, has just come back to New Zealand after 18 months in the Pacific Islands. For the next few months he means to stay here with his secretary, Patience Empson, and a great bulk of notes, to be sorted and cross-referenced and transcribed. The product will be, in due course, another Gibbings book, of narrative and story and engraving.

It will not be his first Pacific Islands book—he was in Tahiti 18 years ago and published an illustrated folk story afterwards. But he means it to be "a fairly solid kind of book," and after 18 months in Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, the Cook Islands, and Tahiti, he has the material to make it so.

We renewed our acquaintance with this 20-stone bearded Irishman in Auckland when he arrived from Tahiti, and he was ready for us with a story that goes back to March of last year—to the

evening before his birthday, which is on March 23. It was a story he had reminded himself to tell *The Listener* when he got back: On that Friday evening, a party was being given for Gibbings on the lawn outside the boarding-house where he had been staying in

A "Listener" Interview

Tonga. Native boys were assembled on the lawn with guitars, and the singing was just about to begin, when the woman who ran the boarding-house came on the verandah.

"Be quiet, everybody," she says, "Mr. Gibbings is going to speak."

"The devil I am," says Gibbings.

"But you are," says the landlady. And then sure enough he does. The native boys are all thoroughly mystified—Gibbings sits on the lawn, but Gibbings's voice is coming from inside the House.

We looked up our files to check the date—2YA broadcast one of the recorded readings from "Lovely is the Lee" at 8.30 p.m. on Friday, March 22.

"It couldn't have been better timed," Gibbings told us. "A friend of hers had heard the announcement that it was going to be on, and knew we were staying there. So she rang up and told her to switch it on."

Pearls and Perils

We began to ask in a general way about the whole Polynesian venture, and Gibbings produced a sheet of notes Miss Empson had typed out for such as ourselves—which informed us that out of 18 months in the Islands he had spent nine in Samoa, several weeks each in Fiji, Tonga, and Tahiti, and four months in the Cook Islands.

He fished for shark in Tonga, with a lure and a noose—to slip over their heads when the sharks came alongside; and for the octopus in Samoa, with a lure made of cowrie shell to resemble a rat, the traditional enemy of the octopus. And while he was watching men fishing for pearl shell in Penrhyn (an atoll near the equator) a diver gave him a shell to open. It contained a pearl—a thousand-to-one chance.



ROBERT GIBBINGS
20-stone, but surly-worthy

At some of the islands he visited, the only way to land was over the reef in a boat or canoe, waiting sometimes for half an hour or more for the right wave to lift it over. Gibbings himself was never upset, but he saw other boats capsized at various times, and people badly hurt by being thrown against live coral.

(continued on next page)



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