

THE AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE

(1) "A Nice Place To Be From . . ."

AN American once said of New Zealand, "It's a nice place to be from," placing the emphasis on the *from*. No one else said so succinctly what I had to accept as the final opinion of an American on this country. New Zealand is a blank in the American mind, little more. And feeling at first dumped Lilliputian-like among many Gullivers, it took most of the time I was in America to discover how far he might be right, where nostalgia left off and judgment began.

Riding East from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City was very dull. An Army M.P. who sat across the aisle from us for hundreds of miles was even duller than the ride. Whenever the Negro porter had any leisure he joined us. The Sergeant's conversation was limited almost entirely to "Huh?", "I don't getcha", "Whadd'ya say?" and finally, in desperation he turned to the porter and said, "Why don't she talk English?". . . The Negro boy said "She speaks English better than you do!" Yet when I returned to the car at the end of the day, I surprised them casually examining my flat-heeled incredibly New Zealand shoes and grinning knowingly at each other. Without comment or apology they set them down on the floor.

I was arriving at a strange time in a strange place, but the time and place were no stranger than I. It was February, 1944, between Tarawa and Saipan. my husband was still in the Pacific and I was pregnant. Those Salt Lake women, dressed more effectively for a day's shopping than most New Zealanders for a day at Trentham, took in my hatless head and those same walking shoes at a glance.

THIS is the first of a series of special articles written for "The Listener" by BEATRICE ASHTON, who recently returned to New Zealand after three and a-half years in the U.S.A.

There is a statue of Brigham Young in Temple Square, with his back to the Church and his hand stretched out in supplication to the bank. Mormon traditions die hard in a city where only 40 per cent of the population is Mormon by faith. The Church owns enormous property, controls the largest bank, runs an insurance business, a newspaper, and the most powerful radio station for States around. Converts still drift to Salt Lake City from all over the world and the people are accustomed to the fruit of their missions. I, having such a different origin, stumbled unconsciously on to their stock greeting phrase. . . "How glad you must be to get here!" Since I was looking forward to having my little haf-and-half there in the remote security of that mountain city I was, of course, relieved to have gone safely through submarine waters. But after some weeks of this monotonous reception I had an odd suspicion that these inhabitants of Zion, while intending only kindness, were somehow regarding me as a fortunate refugee from the barbaric insularity of New Zealand in particular and the tax-ridden existence of the British in general. There had been one Englishwoman on board our transport whose sole remark to me in 13 days was, "Don't you think you have done a very foolish thing, to marry an American? Weren't you better off before?" Adding these attitudes together, I began to see why the Americans and the British do not always understand each other.

If Americans have any real knowledge of New Zealand they must come by it accidentally, since their Press and radio give so little attention to it. Two minutes devoted to New Zealand in a newscast paralysed my morning's activities and the unaccustomed words NEW ZEALAND stood out from the page of the paper like two-inch headlines.

Misconceptions

An elevator girl who saw me daily for two or three months asked me at last "Did you learn English here, or could you speak it before you came?" There was at that particular time so much propaganda about the war in the South Pacific that people were apt to regard me as an authority on all fighting-fronts, as if New Guinea and the Solomons were week-end resorts for New Zealanders. These islands were so often confused with the romantic conception of the South Seas that I was sorry I had not added a hula to my accomplishments.

But if I met with great misconceptions about New Zealand I had much to learn about American life. Salt Lakers move slowly across their wide streets, where eight blocks make a mile, speak slowly and softly with a Western slur in their voices, and entirely belied my imaginings of the Wild West. The early Mormons practised great thrift, were sober and industrious; and, along with their intense emphasis on family life, these virtues persist to-day. Their strenuous taming of the West has probably retarded any great surge of culture. In

a city sheltered by great mountains, watered by colourful canyons, and even now surrounded by desert, the houses take on very little strength from the exotic environment. Indoors, they are filled with the same mediocrity and vulgarity that we have here—only the opportunities to follow fashion and display poor taste are so much greater there.

Roses, Roses All the Way!

The time came for us to furnish our flat. Interior decorators in American department stores are elegantly forbidding unless they see a five-figure bank balance reflected in the eye of the customer. Like Citizen Kane, though for different reasons, I had reached the point where rosebuds froze me in my tracks. Terrified of being enmeshed in ecstatic fastoons of roses I blurted without caution, in spite of my small bank balance "Give me anything but roses!" Immediately we were allies, she from New York and I from New Zealand. Together we mooched about among matt colours and stripes, taking out on each other our irritation with the bric-a-brac and antimacassars of Salt Lake homes.

It happens that gradually you accept new surroundings for what they are and settle comfortably into a new life. Mostly the process goes on because of the gentle pressure of society. Suddenly your own speech is strange to you, your easy acceptance of what had earlier seemed crass or sentimental, over-studied or over-casual, startles you. The softening-up process is over and your Americanisation has gone a long way.

Conscious resistance is a funny thing. Some girls set the table New Zealand fashion with high disregard for the ramifications of an American menu, others open their windows wide and unblushingly disturb the balance of the air-conditioning system, some cling desperately to their teapots in a nation of coffee-drinkers, dress their children in wool from the skin up, or persist in tweeds to the end. Each to her own particular New Zealand whim . . . but for every time I held my ground with my untimely socialistic opinions, capitalist America made an inroad elsewhere. And so I am converted to the point where a refrigerator and a washing-machine are a necessity.

Children—and Christmas

Nothing so speeded my Americanisation as having an American child. Americans have a natural knack with small children but have contrived that their standard of living should be very high. I refused to accept the idea that a mink coat is the ultimate goal in any woman's life, that a little white house scarcely different from the rest is the very least that marriage guarantees, that a new car every year is less than luxurious; but what mother of a first child can deprive herself of labour-saving gadgets or the child of first-class equipment? It was not unpleasant to discover that canned food, rubber panties, and cotton shirts saved me enormous effort and did the infant no harm. With every day of a child's life there is a new reason for contact with the community on the most imitative level. It is impossible to live by the Plunket book for

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THE MAIN STREET of Bingham, a Utah mining village—a photograph that might have been taken no farther away than the Waikato or the West Coast