

FORTY YEARS ON . . .

ONE of Time's mercies is to shut our eyes at intervals so that we can't see, and our ears so that we can't hear. I first saw Nelson nearly 40 years ago, when I had the solemnly

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

One of my absurdities was to try to abstain from killing, and it was not enough to go vegetarian and give up shooting and fishing. I also made peace with sandflies, which I allowed to suck my blood until they fell off gorged, and that was a considerable ordeal for a young fool who also thought that God gave him the sun to enjoy and who used to climb up into the hills and lie naked. I might have forgotten it for ever if the sandflies in the Nelson waterworks reserve had not bred true to type for as many generations as sandflies live through in four decades, and if they had not preserved their venom unadulterated. But the moment they began to attack last week—in clouds as they do before rain—I

felt tinglings that I had not known for two human generations and recalled with some shame when I had endured such misery before, and why.

The sandflies are still there because the bush is still there, and the water, and the warmth, and the stillness. But there was a little black grass-hopper that used to annoy me, too, and he seemed to have disappeared—unless I was too early for him—and a big green cricket was there which I had never seen before. In general, however, it is fire that has changed New Zealand, and since no one gets into that reserve without a permit, the bush stands as it did when I first saw it, and very much as it must have been when Arthur Wakefield first saw it in 1842. It is not, therefore, surprising that the sandflies are holding their own, but it was a pleasant shock to see the wood pigeons. Even on Kapiti I have not seen 15 or 20 pigeons in the air together (though I thought I once saw 12). But I saw them in that gully within two miles of Nelson city. The tuis were there, too, and the bell-birds, their first notes ringing out just before dawn. But the pigeons were the sensation—dozens of them in a few hundred acres of virgin

bush. Since a pigeon hatches only one egg at a time, and is almost as trusting as when Nelson was first settled, it must be more than an Act of Parliament that preserves it.

NELSON when I first knew it meant hops; then apples and jam; then tobacco. It has always meant sunshine, too, but selling sunshine is a recent development in which the province has to meet competition. It leads

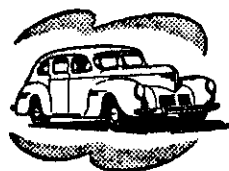
A LITTLE OF EVERYTHING

in bright hours, but not yet in the other aids to a tourist boom—rapid and smooth communication with large cities, modern hotels, bold advertising. Christchurch is 275 miles away by Blenheim and almost as far by Murchison and the Lewis Pass. Wellington is ten hours away by water, very rough water sometimes and always a very small steamer. It is clear, too, that ten men who engage in a shouting match with a hundred men will be shouted down; and that will always be Nelson's fate wherever it turns. If it talks about its mountains—they are well worth talking about—there will be ten times

the volume of noise raised for Ruapehu and Mt. Cook. If it advertises its climate, it invites Gisborne and Tauranga, North Auckland and Central Otago, to talk about theirs, and to put a little more money behind the talks.

It is a situation that, if I belonged to Nelson, I think I would not regret. I would be satisfied with the tobacco and the hops, the apples, the raspberry, and the jam. If they were not enough I would turn to the paddocks of wheat and barley, and from them to the timber and the coal. Nelson's good land is limited, but most of it is very good, and all of it very beautiful. I don't know whether the Riwaka area is or is not the most productive corner in New Zealand, acre by acre. I was told that it was by a schoolboy I met there and his knowledge was probably as accurate as that of the barber who told me the same story in Hawera, of the farmer who repeated it in Paeroa, and of the banker who was even more sweeping in Poverty Bay. I know that every acre in Riwaka was being encouraged to produce and that the eggs were in many baskets.

BUT I thought all the same that the hops were disappearing. For every kiln I saw that was still in use, or
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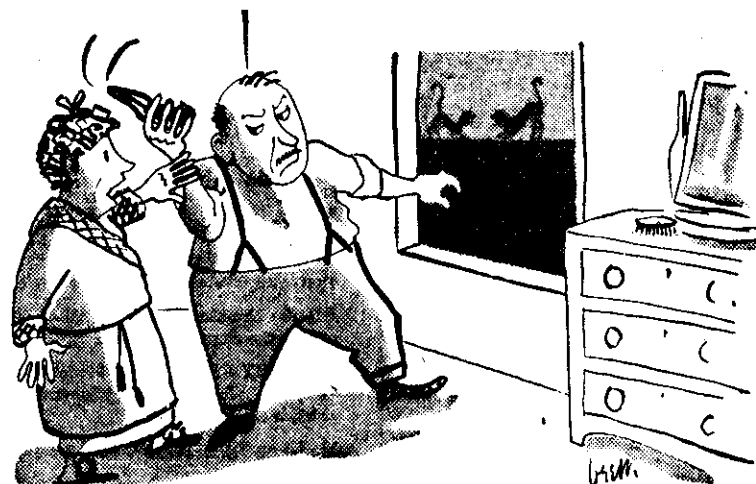
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