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BOOK REVIEWS

(continued from previous page)

well of this book and that is the case, but it is a pity, considering the value of the book, that it has no index.

PIONEER WOMEN OF OTAGO

THE OTAGO OF OUR MOTHERS. By Eileen L. Soper. Otago Centennial Historical Publications, 1948.

WHEN New Zealand's centennial arrived eight years ago, something like justice was done to the achievements and character of our pioneer women. There were the two volumes of experience issued by the Women's Institutes and the Women's Division of the Farmers' Union respectively, and Helen Simpson's Book *Women in New Zealand* has proved one of the most popular of the Government's Centennial Surveys. Now the Otago Centennial Committee is early in the field with a volume on the women of that province.

Mrs. Soper has not attempted anything like a full-scale history, but in a book of 94 pages has written a summary of women's activities and endurances illustrated with well-chosen extracts from letters and diaries. The result is that we see history in a small compass but clear and in the round. Mrs. Soper wisely gives us a picture at the beginning of the kind of life these Scottish

adventurers left behind and devotes substantial space to the voyages. What courage it must have taken to leave the old land, however hard conditions were, and embark on a ship of a few hundred tons for a voyage right across the world to an unknown country, where they knew they would have to build a society from the very foundations. Life on board ship, especially in the Roaring Forties, was liable to be plain hell. With one exception, no hardships after arrival—the first leaky, draughty, makeshift houses, the general primitive living conditions, the uncertainty about supplies, the loneliness—could equal the days and nights when the little community was battered down in a storm. The one exception was that the ship had a doctor, whereas the settler's wife might not be able to get one when he was most needed. Children arrived in numbers and it might be at most inopportune times. Mrs. Soper cites two tragedies of childbirth; one is as heart-rending as any colony could show.

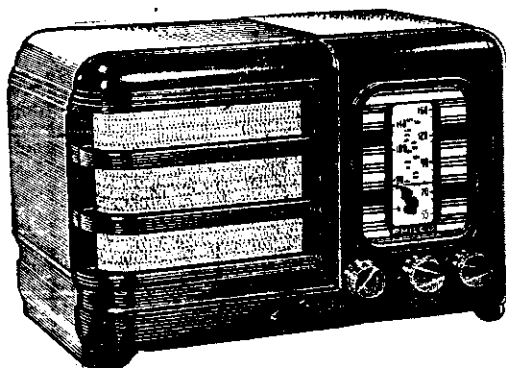
As Mrs. Soper shows in some detail, the pioneers in the John Wickliffe and the Philip Laing were not the first white people in Otago. Nor were the Canterbury Pilgrims the first in Canterbury. There were white women and their families on the shores of Otago Harbour, and others in Johnny Jones's settlement at Waikouaiti. The farm there supplied the newcomers with fresh food. The Otago women did a fine job in a new land. Like their husbands they built better than they knew. This in the most literal as well as the figurative sense, for Mrs. Soper makes the interesting side-point that the wattle-and-daub houses were more pleasing to look at than many built later of more pretentious material. Innate good taste may have been a factor, but simplicity of style was forced on the pioneers by paucity of material. The vulgarity of design which has been so common in our domestic architecture came with prosperity and the spread of poor urban taste.

It is one of the several good features in this book that Mrs. Soper does not exclude the seamy side of life. There were such things as drunkenness and deserting husbands, and the employment of dancing girls to encourage men to drink; there was even the sale of a wife. One suspects there were more complaints than Mrs. Soper suggests. But one does get a picture of general adaptability and cheerfulness. Mrs. Soper presents a community that in the main made the best of things, and was happy in creating its own amusements out of simple elements. We should like to know one thing. When the pioneers emigrated, it was the custom in going to church for the women to walk a little way behind their husbands, a sign that the man was very definitely master of the household. How long did this custom last in Otago?

The question is all the more pertinent because Mrs. Soper has something to say about Otago's very good record in the provision of higher education for women, and in crusading for better industrial conditions for women workers. The Otago Girls' High School was the first of the kind in New Zealand, and Otago University, which ante-dated the University of New Zealand, admitted women without question when it was asked to do so. On one matter Mrs. Soper may be corrected.

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