

THE FINEST VIEW IN NEW ZEALAND

WHAT is the finest view in New Zealand? This question, in exactly these terms, was asked by Donald McCullough, the English question-master, in the Brains Trust discussion at IYA, the first conducted in New Zealand. Frankly, Mr. McCullough said, he was spending a few weeks in New Zealand, and would like some guidance in the matter of views. The answers he got from his panel of four were interesting but by no means exhaustive. The choices were all North Island, which, to begin with, is enough to make the South Islander think about seeing his local M.P. or telegraphing to the Prime Minister. One preference was for the view from the Thames-Coromandel road at Te Kouma looking out on the Hauraki Gulf. A second member of the Trust mentioned the same area—any high part of Rangitoto or Waiheke Island or the coast commanding a view of the Gulf. The third mentioned the view from the slopes of Ruapehu, and the fourth gave as the two most beautiful views he had ever seen, Wellington from the sea when the sun was rising, and Lake Waikaremoana from the road round the lake.

It should be noted that of these four, one was a newcomer (he picked Wellington and Waikaremoana) and another said she hadn't seen much of New Zealand. She had not reached the top of Ruapehu but inferred that you should do so if you could, which is excellent advice. I remember as a small child meeting a man who had been to the top, an undertaking of considerable size and probably some risk in those days, and he told me that from the summit you could just see both east and west coasts. It follows that, asked this question, most of us must qualify the reply by saying "the finest I have seen." We New Zealanders move about a lot, but there cannot be so very many of us who have seen every great view in our own country. Take my own case. I have set myself to see the whole of New Zealand, but there are still important gaps. I have not seen Manapouri and the Te Anau-Milford Sound country (or any of the southern sounds), or Waikaremoana, or Stewart Island, or the country round the East Cape, or the extreme north, beyond Kaitiaki.

What Do We Mean?

So the last thing two people should do on this subject is to quarrel over it. Let us avoid dogmatism. If an Aucklander thinks that the finest view is that from Mt. Eden or Rangitoto, and the Dunedin man votes for Milford Sound, and neither has seen the other's choice—well, let them compare notes amicably over a cup of tea. I suggest that in approaching such a discussion we should ask ourselves certain questions and bear in mind certain factors. What do we mean by the finest view? The most majestic, the grandest, or the most beautiful in a quieter sense? Majesty and beauty are not always quite the same. When it comes to grandeur and majesty the South Island is an easy first. Ruapehu and Egmont can be majestic, and James Cowan put in the top flight of New Zealand views the vista from Taupo township across the lake in winter, with the three mountains in the distance, but there is nothing in the north

"WHAT is the finest view in New Zealand?"—a question put to the Auckland Brains Trust by Donald McCullough—has been repeated in a letter received this week from a correspondent, who goes on to suggest that "The Listener" should take a poll of its readers on the subject. With newsprint still in short supply it would be a reckless step to declare an open season on such a controversial topic, but the accompanying article, written for "The Listener" by A.M., is an attempt to deal with the subject objectively, and to discover what it is that makes a fine view fine

to compare with the massed grandeur, the tremendous architecture of nature, that is to be found in such profusion in the south. A man I know who is in a particularly good position to judge, says the two finest views in New Zealand are the Franz Josef Glacier when the rata is out, and Milford Sound, entered from the sea.

Then some people prefer views with humanity in them, to views that are purely natural. They like mellow landscape. So, to some extent, we should compare like things with like, and bear in mind the saying phrase "of its kind." The panorama of the Canterbury Plains from the Cashmere Hills, Christchurch, is one of the great plain-and-mountain

views of the world. It is at its best on a clear nor-west day in winter, when the Alps are mantled low, the distances are shortened, and the blue is at its deepest. I believe it to be more beautiful now than it was when the pioneers arrived, because the city has been built below among trees

In a silvern afternoon
We saw the city sleeping.
Sleeping and rustling a little
Under the brindled hills.

and the plain right up to the foothills has been patterned by pasturage and tillage.

Moreover, moods and associations count for a lot. The sight of Alps, like the smell of tussock-land, is in the blood

of the Canterbury man. The North Islander may carry through life the vision of deep bush and the tang of tidal flats. To ask what is the finest view is like asking what is the finest line of poetry. Professor Walter Murdoch, answering this the other day, chose among others, "After life's fitful fever he sleeps well." It was John Morley's choice too (I think he described it as the "most moving" line), and if a mouse may follow a lion, it is my own. But you might prefer something savouring less of mortality, like "Of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn." There are numbers of "finest" lines as there are numbers of "finest" views.

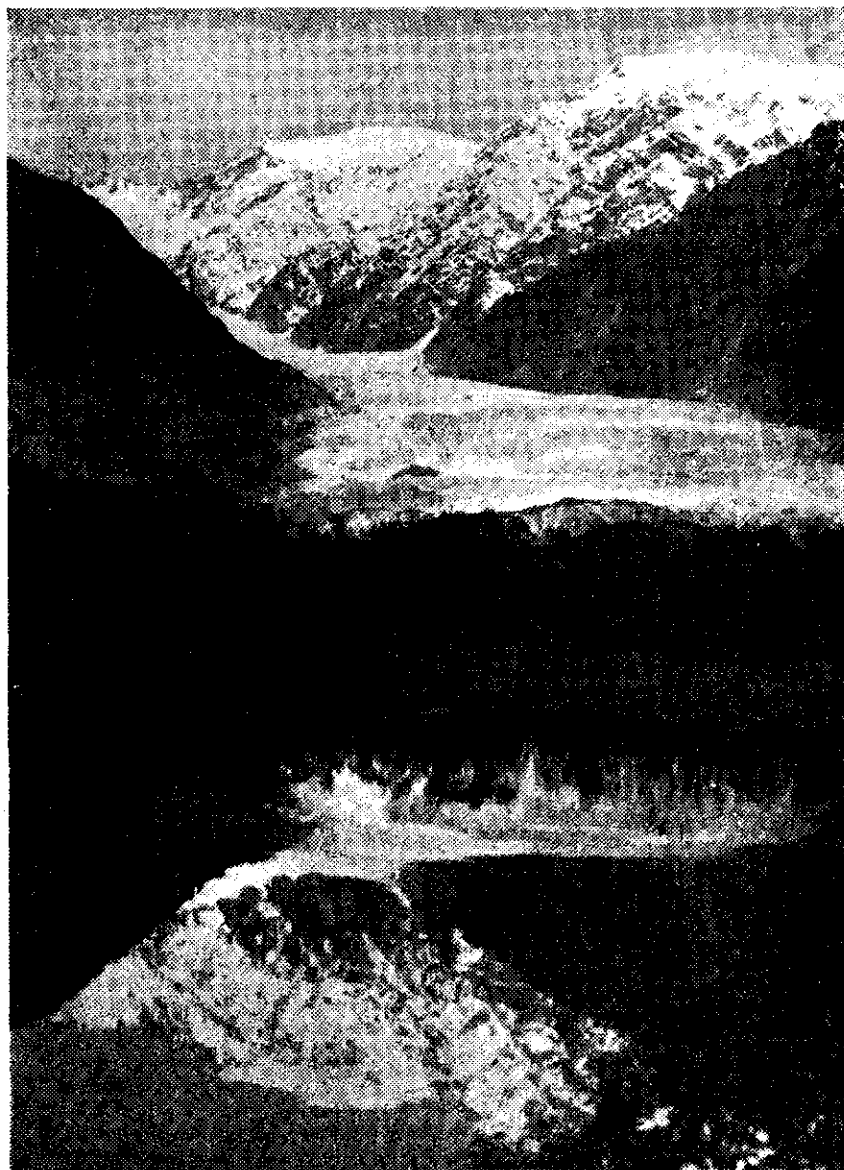
Early one morning when I was young and on holiday and feeling particularly happy, I arrived at New Plymouth in a ship. I looked out of my porthole, and there was the town in its dress of trees and behind it soaring into the cloudless blue was Egmont—"clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful." This is one of the great views of my life, but the lasting impression it made owed something to special circumstance. When I described this to a young friend the other day, he said quite rightly: "Oh, yes, but the porthole helped it. The port framed the picture, cutting out the extraneous." A window does this, and there is something peculiarly conducive to romance in a cabin port. So often it is through this magic "O" that you get the first sight of new lands. I had my first close sight of England this way. "I have seen strange lands from under the arched white sails of ships." Here you get a similar frame and a similar quickening of the sense of wonder.

Question of Access

But I never think of that sight of New Plymouth and Egmont without recalling a story of an abysmally prosaic kind. An uncle of mine, chief engineer in a coaster, was passing New Plymouth one perfect afternoon on his way north. The town nestled by the shore, and Egmont rose in clear majesty. My uncle, leaning over the rail and taking his fill of the scene, called to the cook, a hard-bitten old shell-back. "Look at that, Bill. Isn't it lovely?" Bill spat and looked and after a pause he said: "You see that pub over there," indicating something by the wharf, "you can get beer for threepence there."

We must therefore, I think, make certain allowances and reservations. If there were a symposium on the subject, I would suggest that the field should be confined to what is reasonably easy of access. No doubt there are views from alpine summits that surpass anything in sweep of grandeur, but we can't all climb Mt. Cook, or even Ruapehu and Egmont. And there are so many things in this extraordinarily well favoured land of ours to fill our hearts with beauty. One much-travelled man put first the view from Britannia Heights in Nelson, looking across Tasman Bay to the snows of Mt. Arthur. One of the most beautiful quiet views I remember was looking from the hill behind Whakarewarewa along a stretch of blue as far as I could see. The month was May, perhaps the best for all the Rotorua district. Much of our New Zealand scenery is at its best in winter. There are few "bare ruined

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THE FRANZ JOSEF GLACIER: "When it comes to grandeur and majesty the South Island is an easy first"