"GOING AHEAD"

Written for "The Listener" by
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WHEN I was a child I was amazed to hear a visitor remark to my elders and betters that a neighbouring township was "going ahead" faster than our own. Visions of the streets and houses creeping away over the hills (if they had gone in the other direction they would have sunk in the mudflats) tormented me until I could ask my mother what was meant. "Oh," she said offhandedly (she was late with the dinner) "it only means more people, more houses going up." "Why do they want more people?" "More business," she said, "more money to spend in the town."

I went away and thought this over. There was a piece in the puzzle that didn't fit, and it brought me again to mother's elbow. "Are the people in the big towns, then," I asked, "richer than those in the small towns?" Mother looked startled. "No," she said and after a moment, "they have more rich people, and their poor are poorer. Most of us wouldn't be any better off."

This left me exactly where I was with the problem of "going ahead."

It is obvious enough that a town gives its citizens a much broader life if it is large enough to sustain a full range of cultural and sporting and educational facilities — theatres, musical societies, playing fields, swimming baths, high schools and adult education. The dullest places are those too small for such completeness and too large for the charm of the township where everybody knows everybody else—though it's amazing what has been done with a couple of thousand people under vigorous leadership. But when a town or city has passed what might be called its social minimum, what special advantage is there in "going ahead?"

I have stood on Mount Eden and contemplated Auckland. I have stood on the Cashmere Hills and contemplated Christchurch. The hills of Wellington and Dunedin, bless them, are so placed that from no one point can we see too much. I have seen delightful seaside and inland places 50 miles from the Central Post Office being hooked along as little more than extensions of the cities. The sprawling, hungry size of these cities — babies as they are compared with Sydney, New York and London—is oppressive. Oppressive, not because of the number of people, but because of the welter of mediocre suburban streets which divide the civic area from the true countryside.

TO-DAY I go walking beneath the oaks of Hagley Park, and crunching the acorns beneath my feet I ponder that exciting discussion we had with the town-planner. Oh, he wasn't a professional, official town-planner engaged in thinking out ways of zoning industrial and housing areas that have already grown crazily; he was a young, enthusiastic chap about to go abroad, yet so full of his ideas about New Zealand that he'd spent a couple of hours expounding them to a pair of slight acquaintances, for no special reason except that we were interested in what he was saying.

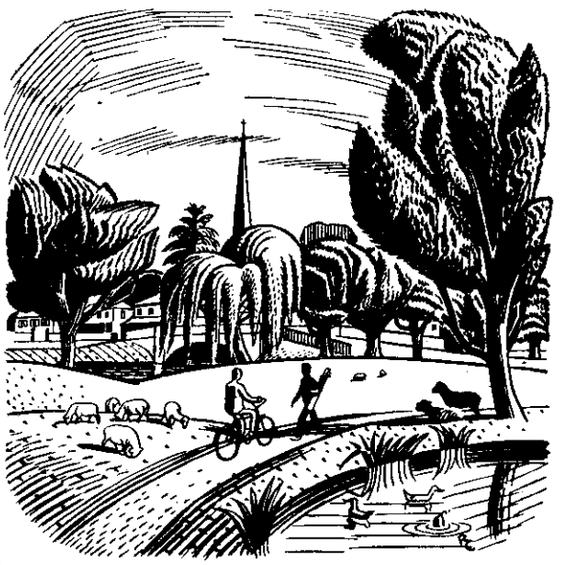
I think of him in Hagley Park because he believed that four hundred and fifty acres in the heart of a city was too much. I couldn't agree about that, being one of the Hands-off-the-Park brigade myself, and I feel the same way about Wellington's town belt. But when he said, "Why must every house have its 20 perches of land? Why should we add section to section like rows of dominoes until we've laid out our cities over what ought to be farm land?"—we had to stop and repeat to ourselves, Yes, why?

In England, he said, cities were cities and country was country. From the city of Oxford, with a population nearly the same as Dunedin, it was possible to reach the open fields by a walk of no more than a mile. The Canterbury founders had contemplated a Christchurch of like compactness, encompassed by its four avenues; but the pioneers' aversion to overcrowding, their love of space, had defied all plans and created the house-and-section tradition. The idea of space was right, he said, but couldn't we find a solution which combined spaciousness with compactness.

Leave us our vegetable plot! we pleaded. Leave us a corner where the children can play! Leave us at least one row of sweet peas!

Do you ever *use* your front lawn? he countered.

Yes, he'd leave us the vegetable plot. He'd like to take out a dozen houses in our block and rebuild them together, perhaps in a U-shape, with sufficient division for privacy and with planning for the maximum sunshine. He'd lay out the vegetable plots at the rear without undue wastage on paths. He'd have



"He believed that 450 acres in the heart of a city was too much"