

SOUTH FOR SUN

THERE are some grounds for the popular belief in the North Island that those who cross Cook Strait from the south never recross it. The North Island is wetter and warmer, and most people prefer heat to cold. There is in any case the simple fact that there are now considerably more than a million people north of Cook Strait and not many more than half a million south of it.

But I have always thought it strange that people in, say, the Wairarapa, the Manawatu, or the Waikato wonder what is wrong with the man who returns to Canterbury or Otago when he retires. Whatever the plants say, or even the thermometer, there are more physically uncomfortable days in Wellington, Hamilton and Palmerston North than in Christchurch, Timaru, or Oamaru. If puriris will not grow in the South Island, or pohutukawas, if there is only one small belt of tussock country in the north and no permanent glaciers, a cold day in Wellington feels colder than anything in the South Island short of a

pipe-bursting frost or a blizzard. I have in fact felt colder in Whangarei than I can remember having felt in Dunedin, and I don't think that the explanation lies in age only—that I was 20 when I lived in Dunedin and 60 when I was last in Whangarei. I know that Whangarei nine days in 10 is warmer, muggier, drowsier than Dunedin ever is; but it can be cold, and it can very often be wet as well; and when those two come together it is easy to think that even a Scotch mist in the Octagon in July would be a good exchange.

In any case going north for warmth is safer than going north for the sun. There are two thousand hours of sun in Wellington every year and only fifteen hundred in Dunedin; but if you want holiday sun—dry, hard, clear heat without vapour—you must go to the Mackenzie country or Central Otago.

AND before you get to one place or the other you must pass through South Canterbury (or over it). If I had been born in South Canterbury I am sure I should think it just about as near paradise as mortals ever get. But

PAUSE IN PARADISE

I was close to 40 before I had done more than pass through by train, and the two years I then spent there were not enough to obliterate the long years I had spent somewhere else. Since then my longest stay has been two days.

Fortunately we don't always have to appreciate beauty to keep it alive. It is

sometimes in the nature of things, and not, as we have been told, in the eye of the beholder. Not many white people have yet seen South Canterbury, since it was only yesterday geologically that it first filled a white man's eye. Nor is it likely that many brown men have seen it either, since the Maori population can never have been large, and the pre-Maori visitors to its limestone caves were no doubt a smaller remnant still. Its human story has yet to be lived and told, its poets to be born, its artists to enter the womb. But their home has been planned and their future fixed for a million years. As long as the kind of world we now know lasts, its mountains will look on the downs, and its downs look out on the sea. The southerlies will be broken before they reach the Waitaki, the Rangitata will race across the northern lies. There will be no new forests, no new lakes, no new Erewhons. But there may be new swamps. Sloth may waterlog the lowlands and misdirected energy scar the highlands. Much that now looks smiling and secure may revert to barren wilderness.

But the general design will remain. Foolish generations may go hungry till wiser generations save them, but the great barrier south and west will stand across the winds, the sun will lift the dew in the morning and send beasts and birds into cover at mid-day, dust will come down the gorges on the gales, shingle sweep in floods to the sea. And one day joy will come too, appreciation of all these things by men and women with the eyes to see them and the tongues to tell them out.

ALL that is coming, but it has not come yet. South Canterbury at present is not much different from North Canterbury except that one pockets its sun and the other disperses it. Hammer certainly is different from Mount Cook, but the farmer of Omihi sees the same mountains and gets much the same out of his working days as a farmer at Fairview or Kingsdown.

You are a little more aware of the sea in the south, since the mountains have pushed you nearer to it and brought you more consciously under its spell. But you are probably less aware of the richness of life when you have made your money. There are many fine homes in Timaru, but I don't think a wandering poet would be welcomed in some of them, and I am not sure that a wandering saint would get in at all. Wool and frozen meat have done their job too quickly—brought comfort too soon and fixed standards too firmly. If man is what we think he is he will some day want something else in Timaru,

By "SUNDOWNER"

but fat lambs and frost-free wheat make a pretty good heaven in the meantime.

FROM Timaru I went to St. Andrews, and from St. Andrews straight west to the Hunter Hills and Blue Cliffs station. I am a little ashamed to remember that I called at Blue Cliffs with some uneasiness, and that I was still

THE NABOBS

uneasy when I moved later to Longbeach. I knew that I had to call if I wanted to see Canterbury with both eyes. I felt that I should also see Te Waimate, and knew that it was my own snobbery and not the uppishness of the owners of those places that was holding me back. They were prepared to meet me as a human being, but I was not quite prepared to meet them as human beings—to forget everything but the fact that they had lived all their lives in New Zealand as I had, and done what seemed good to them as naturally as I had done what seemed good to me, that they had probably lived more conscientiously and had certainly lived more consistently, taking the road they knew best and loved best, and not (as Whitman put it) making anybody sick by talking about their souls. It was my own course which had been hesitating and uncertain, not theirs, and it was my reservations about them rather than theirs about me which followed me uneasily to their doors.

I was ashamed when I was received not merely with courtesy, which I expected, but with unmistakable friendliness; and I am still ashamed to think how difficult I always find it on occasions like these to forget everything but the things we all inherit equally—hungry bodies and cloudy minds, and seldom enough light for our feet.

SOME day, I cannot doubt, no individual will own land. No one will wish to own it, or feel equal to carrying

all its burdens. If the best farmers to-day do own their land, the best of those best feel that they own it in trust. I felt that

LANDOWNERS

very strongly on Blue Cliffs. Only in the pages of *Tutira* have I encountered the same curious interest in the changes that settlement has made in the covering of the hills, and I have nowhere else seen a catalogue compiled by the owners themselves of the plant-life on their own holding. To such a thing there can be no end, but when I saw the Blue Cliffs list it contained more than 260 species of plants (not including trees or big shrubs) which Dr. and Mrs. Woodhouse and their family had identified or had had identified for them; and to them of course it was far more than a list. It was a part of the record of their lives, and to me a piece of the evidence of the spirit in which their lives were lived. They would not have agreed, if I had raised the question, that any plant in this list was of no economic value, since they feel strongly that every plant has a life relation to every other plant, from tussock to lichen, and that it is easier to disturb the balance than to understand it.

"I don't even know with certainty," Dr. Woodhouse said to me, "what my sheep eat. I know some of the things they eat, but I don't know all of them, and I am farther away still from knowing what they ate when settlement first began, or would eat again if vanished things were restored. Until we know very much more than any of us know at present we are working in the dark both as graziers and as soil conservers."

He agreed that this knowledge would not come in his own lifetime.

"Much of it will not come in two or three lives. We must begin now, but we must plan for a century ahead—and perhaps longer. Until we have the facts we shall go on making costly mistakes."

"Mistakes that our children will have to pay for."

"Yes, there's no escape from that. But we can escape from doing nothing. We can stop saying we know when we don't, and we can begin charging ourselves with some of the costs of finding out."

(To be continued)



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