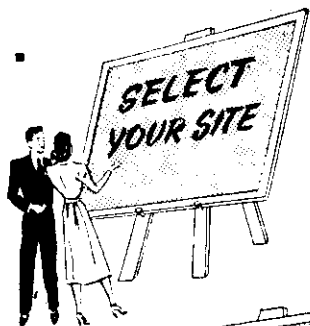




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## BOOKS

# The Colonial Spirit

*TIDAL CREEK.* By Roderick Finlayson. Angus and Robertson, Sydney. New Zealand price, 8/3.

(Reviewed by Frank Sargeson)

IT is one of the merits of Mr. Finlayson's book that it will set many readers thinking about the impulses that brought their forefathers to New Zealand. When our country began to be settled scientific socialism wasn't heard of, but the humanitarian sentiments of utopian socialism were becoming widely known and felt. Many of the early immigrants had had painful experience of the disadvantageous side of the social and economic bargain so very admirably summarised by the Rev. Dr. Follott in Peacock's *Crochet Castle*—"There are two great classes of men: those who produce much and consume little; and those who consume much and produce nothing." Many of them must have emigrated with the hope that they would find a better order of things overseas; and their things-will-be-better-out-there feeling is probably connected with the present-day New Zealander's belief that things are better out here.

Mr. Finlayson cannot, however, be said to share in this prevalent belief. As may be discovered from his interesting essay, *Our Life in This Land*, published in 1940, he believes the one clear advantage of settlement in New Zealand was the opportunity it gave men to acquire sufficient land for what might be described as mixed subsistence farming, and so establish themselves in a fruitful, but at the same time chastening, relation with the mysterious forces of Nature—and farming more or less of this kind did indeed become the foundation of our national life, until refrigerated shipping was introduced and began to destroy "our soil, our health, and our social structure."

In reading *Tidal Creek* it is an advantage, I think, to know something of this historical background, and Mr. Finlayson's attitude to it—otherwise the reader may fail to see what the author is driving at, and feel inclined to dismiss the story as a mere piece of period reporting. *Tidal Creek* belongs to a quite different literary order; and a convenient parallel may be found in the short stories of Henry Lawson. What Lawson did for Australia, Mr. Finlayson more self-consciously attempts to do for New Zealand. That is to say, he attempts to give literary body to what is for him essentially true and vital in the colonial spirit; and there is a further parallel with Lawson inasmuch as he does so at a time when the everyday manifesta-

tions of that spirit are becoming more and more rapidly extinguished.

Uncle Ted, then, the untidy bachelor farmer on his untidy little farm at Tidal Creek, is not just an eccentric whose idiosyncrasies were carefully observed by his young nephew, remembered, and are now faithfully documented by a nostalgic author in search of the odd and old-fashioned. There is, of course, something of that; and at the same time there is a great deal of something more. Everything that Uncle Ted says and does has a double function; it is what one expects from a character so indubitably flesh and blood; and it is perfectly in keeping with all that

the author has ever felt, and passionately felt, about the country to which he belongs. Which is to say that Uncle Ted has not been copied from life, he has been created; and to a very great extent successfully created.

His adventures and misfortunes are never presented as mere anecdotes, detached and complete in themselves; instead they each of them go to make up a larger pattern of things—a pattern which, if you examine it closely enough, may be found to reveal simple clues to the essentials of the

good life for men upon this earth. For example: waste is bad; the ancient rites of hospitality and friendship must be observed; true well-being is in the labour of achieving, not in the leisure of achievement; men should be reconciled to each other, to Nature, and to God; the untidiness of the countryside is a sign of life, the tidiness of the city may be a sign of death.

It is possible that *Tidal Creek* may eventually come to be regarded as a sort of swan song of our country's comparative innocence. (Though "song" may be hardly the right word, since Mr. Finlayson's writing is visual rather than aural.) But in the meantime its transparent honesty will recommend itself to all readers who are prepared to appreciate something genuine if and when it comes their way. As those who know the best of the author's short stories may expect, all that is familiar and for the most part taken for granted in our environment, is accurately observed and deeply felt. Personally, I would disagree with Mr. Finlayson in only one particular. Wouldn't the "bees" that buzz around the cow-muck on Page 203 really be hover flies?

## AUSTRALIAN COLONY

*LAND LOOKING WEST.* By Malcolm Uren. Oxford University Press. Geoffrey Cumberlege, 21/-.

**EDWARD GIBBON WAKEFIELD** was in the habit of referring to the Swan River Settlement whenever he wished to illustrate the manner in which



**RODERICK FINLAYSON**  
"The untidiness of the countryside is a sign of life"