

The Paradoxes of New Zealand Winter

Written for "The Listener" by MARIE ALDERSON

WINTER in the North Island always makes me feel that I am experiencing an optical illusion or living in some fantastic and impossible dream. Everything is green and there is no snow. It looks as if spring were already here. The only real proof that it is winter is in the feeling of one's bones. The very marrow seems to congeal, and although the mind seems to doubt the paradox of cold, penetrating and numbing, against a background of palms and flowers and other indisputable signs of a semi-tropical climate, it really is winter. But there is no snow and it just doesn't make sense.

Winter, pure and undiluted, should be a time of snow, much snow. At least that is winter in the mind and heart of one born and bred in the far north, in Canada. Four winters in New Zealand have not yet eradicated that surprise which feels the approach of chilblains and goose-flesh, yet sees the palms and feathery tree ferns waving derisively in a fresh southerly. To a Canadian the wind from the south can only mean balmy, fragrant days of warmth, just as a north wind can only mean blasts from the eternal ice and snow of the Arctic, and not soft, moist breezes from the isles of eternal summer. Ah, me, I really am up-side-down in this "down under" world.

In New Zealand only the true northern trees and plants act as if winter had come. The oak, willow, ash and other aliens shed their leaves and behave altogether as if they expected a nice fluffy blanket of snow to cover their exposed bones until the soft fingers of spring mould the new leaf in a carefully wrapped bud. Birds which do not migrate have no idea of the advent of winter. They twitter and sing gleefully the live long day, changing not one iota the song they use for summer purposes. In the snowy north they have a profound sense of the fitness of things. When winter approaches they subdue the joyous notes of spring and summer and, in appropriately modulated tones, chant a sombre melody in keeping with the sleeping earth children, the flowers, trees, bees, squirrels and bears.

NORTHERN winter is a cosy time indoors. Warmth is a necessity. You just have to keep warm or you freeze to death. In a New Zealand winter you are never really warm indoors or out-of-doors. You are never warm, yet you can't freeze to death no matter how intensely you may long for that oblivion which is said to precede death by freezing, that semi-comatose state where chilblains and goose-flesh are lost in a bodily Nirvana. Thoughts of a furnace spreading waves of warmth to mingle with the pine-scented blaze in the fireplace may dull the discomfort of layers and layers of clothing which only bring

the illusion of warmth, as you sit in an unheated flat and shiver, but the thought or vision is brief.

Now that we cannot use our electric heaters, which always seem to me pathetically and shamefacedly inadequate against a southerly, the torture of undressing for bed is a nightmare which is anticipated throughout all one's waking hours. It is a thing to be put off as long as possible, but when the hands of the clock clasp on the numeral twelve one takes the plunge. Plunge is not the exact word, really. Undressing is more akin to wading slowly into icy water. After the many layers of clothing, which always remind me of peeling an onion, are removed, one makes a dive for the pyjamas which have been curled cosily around the hot water bottle. Make no mistake about it, the battle with the cold is over only in spots. Too many hot water bottles would be required to make the bed a uniform temperature, so while one's feet (that's where I usually start) are being introduced to the benign radiation exuding from the bottle, the spine does a boogy-woogy similar, but not akin to, the sensations produced by a Sibelius symphony or a Borodin opera. Various contortions of the body gradually coax the heating apparatus up to the vicinity of the seat of reason. Thus the comforting antidote to cold induces slumber wherein cold and heat are non-existent.

ALAS, you have travelled over only one-half of the vicious circle. Sleep is only a palliative, for you must awaken to a cold world in the morning. Wake to the meaningless trill of birds that haven't enough sense to know that it is a cold, gloomy winter day. The thought of donning clothing faintly damp and decidedly icy gives one pause. In the interval one's thoughts probe back into the dim past of former lives and try to ascertain why one was re-incarnated as a human instead of a New Zealand bird. This leads nowhere much, so the will is concentrated, with all its feeble early morning power, upon the task confronting the shrinking body. One literally plunges into the outer cold and applies layer after layer of refrig-

erated clothing while commanding the mind to dwell upon the steaming cup of hot coffee which will presently cajole the shivering body into the illusion of warmth.

So begins another New Zealand winter day. From hot water bottle to hot water bottle, so to speak, there is no warmth, no heat, no radiation of any kind that might make the world seem a less forlorn and uncharitable place, except the warmth of human kindness and of that there is enough and to spare . . . and a form of torture called a fireplace.

Except in isolated cases, which are looked upon as a weakness, the open fireplace, alone and absolutely unsupported by central heating, is used to combat the rigours of winter. I do not think the ancients could have devised a more subtle, more ingenious form of torture than the blazing hearth fire. No matter how toasted, nay, even scorched,

one's face, hands and shins may become there is not the remotest possibility of eluding the icicle fingers playing up and down one's spine. Turn your back upon the fire and your front starts to congeal almost immediately.

Ah well, as Shelley asked, "If winter comes can spring be far behind?" It is a comforting thought. But no matter how much the mind concentrates on waving palms, green grass and flowers and on that weird and incredible tree which bears lemons and blossoms at one and the same time throughout the whole of a New Zealand winter, the physical body cannot be deluded by these outward signs. It continues to produce goose-flesh and chilblains until the sun is well on its elliptical journey south to bring glorious summer once again. Winter in New Zealand is a paradox which New Zealanders can understand and take. To a Canadian it must always remain a mystery.



"Only the Northern trees and plants act as if winter had come"