



LEFT: "Compared with later years, there was little travelling for pleasure"

## "The Past Has Another Pattern"

*It seems, as one becomes older,  
That the past has another pattern, and ceases  
to be a mere sequence—  
Or even development . . .*

—T. S. Eliot

Written for "The Listener" by ALAN MULGAN

STRICTLY speaking, a century begins in "01" and not in "00," but mathematical accuracy cannot affect the popular significance of the ciphers. "Fifty years," stretching from any point to point, means a long time, but the figure "50" indicating a man's age or a mid-century date, has its own penetrative force. Fifty years is hardly a tick in astronomical time, and is tiny in historical. In the life of a nation it can be short, but it can also be formative, decisive, and even fatal. Forty-seven years after the German Empire was founded, its swollen pride crashed in the dust. With another generation it had risen and crashed again. During that seventy-four years other Empires and kingdoms toppled over or underwent a profound change. Western civilisation was shaken to its foundations, and is now challenged by a new ideology. In a birth of freedom and nationalism nearly all the East has thrown off the domination of the West. The world has moved from the railway train to the faster-than-sound aeroplane, and the atom bomb. Whatever the Universe may be doing, history has quickened its pace.

New Zealand is the youngest of the English-speaking Dominions. As a British colony, Australia had some fifty years' start of us. Dutch South Africa dates to 1652, and French Canada is older. Talk of the youth of the United States is still common, though it is more than fifty years since Wilde wrote of it as the oldest American tradition. We are apt to forget that the Pilgrim Fathers landed as far back as 1620. New Zealand has had a comparatively short infancy, childhood and adolescence. Moreover, it was born, not before or early in the

industrial revolution, but in the middle of it. Railways and steamers were running before the Treaty of Waitangi was signed.

The development of this colonial child was forced. We were not quite sixty years old when, after sending troops to South Africa, we began to think we might be a nation. Within fifty years of that time we fought for survival in the two greatest wars of history, and with a strength and in a geographical range that our grandfathers would have thought fantastic. It was as if a youth of eighteen, looking forward with no misgivings to a conventional coming of age, had suddenly been called on to play a man's part in a long, complicated and tragic family crisis.

I SUGGEST that the effect of this rapid sequence of shattering events on New Zealand life is worth study. Take, for example, our literature. American letters were cradled over a long period in a rapidly growing and buoyant society that worshipped romance and hardly questioned the validity of optimism as a philosophy of life. Our literature has not known this long-continued, confident, large-family life. When new stimulation came to our writers after the first war, the greater world to which they looked for models, and often a market, was sophisticated, disillusioned, and bitter. If a New Zealander wrote another *Huckleberry Finn*, his main object would probably be to depict Huck as the pitiful victim of a conscienceless capitalist economy, and the story might be drowned in a flood of propaganda.

What was New Zealand like in 1900? Externally, because our soldiers were fighting in South Africa, the first to go overseas, we were beginning to come of age. Internally another important event was on the horizon. The census of 1901

showed more people in the North Island than in the South, for the first time since 1861. Greater population and wealth had given the South political power, which it was not slow to use. By 1949, the North Island had more than twice the population of the South. The shift of political power was slower. A few years after the overtaking, an Auckland Minister noted that Cabinet was accustomed to look on Southern requests more favourably than Northern. Auckland fought furiously for what it considered its rights, the South clamoured for the like, and provincial agitation continued to be a national industry.

The national wealth still came mainly from sheep. In 1900 exported butter and cheese were worth a million. To the Aucklanders, wealth was predominantly gold, timber and kauri gum. Only a few seem to have visualised the enormous riches that were to be won for the province through the cow within a few years. Auckland was even advised to farm ostriches. The boom in North Island, and especially Auckland, lands, that was setting in, produced a crop of tares as well as (metaphorical) wheat. In the new century there was another rough pioneering period, in which hardships were not mitigated by the corporate spirit of the early special settlements. There was wild speculation in land, so that from many farms strings of mortgages hung like sausages. One result was that the slump of the 'Thirties hit the North a good deal harder than it did the more stable South. An Auckland girl summed it up unconsciously in an essay: "A farmer is a man who sells farms."

IN 1900 the Queen was still alive, and Victorian conventions ruled at this side of the world. The chaperone had not been ousted. To dance with one girl

all evening was not even thought of. Women drank nothing stronger than mild claret cup, and did not smoke. Their dresses touched the ground, and save for what was ironically called evening dress, went up to the neck and even to the chin. Mixed bathing—to say nothing of brassiere brazenness—had not arrived. A discreet ankle might be shown for tennis, and that recent arrival, hockey. Lipstick, like a red dress in the street, was for those who were no better than they should be. Even when engaged, men and women usually did not go about together alone. Young people might know each other for years without using Christian names, and quite likely the man proposed to "Miss Brown." There was little eating in public places. Afternoon tea was confined mainly to "At Home" calling days. The modern tea-room was beginning to appear, but afternoon tea in offices must have been very rare, and even in the home "elevenses" had not been discovered. Stiff white shirts for men were retreating slowly, but high, stiff, sharp-edged collars—irreverently described as "a white-washed fence round a lunatic asylum"—were commonly worn. Top-hats and frock coats were city wear for business heads. One did not have to be particularly well off to keep a servant. Land agents had lists of houses to let.

Much more than today, people stayed at home and made their own amusements. They gathered round the piano, and played cards or round games. There may have been a few gramophones. The moving picture was still a curiosity; Hollywood was in the future. Stage plays, however, and musical comedy and vaudeville, came frequently, and for its size New Zealand received a remarkable number of overseas entertainers of all kinds. We were content to leave foreign affairs to Britain (save when our Pacific neighbourhood was touched) and cultural standards as well. France was still the traditional enemy. The Royal Academy was art. Architecture was in the trough of Victorian bad taste. Very few New Zealanders wrote books, and very few read them. There was little newspaper or magazine encouragement for the local writer. The *Sydney Bulletin* probably did more for the young New Zealand writer than any local publication. Professional training was backward, and little or no money was spent on research. Education was soundly based, but the way of the poor to secondary school and university lay through competitive scholarships. Free places and bursaries were to come. It was an empirical age, suspicious of the theorist and the expert: "Let a practical man do it." The country was deeply in the pioneering stage, and largely peopled and directed by immigrants. The first native-born Prime Minister did not take office till 1925.

THE whole tempo of life was slower. Wants were fewer, and life more leisurely. Horse buses rumbled on macadamised roads, often rough, and coaches rattled over loose metal or ploughed through mud. Over great stretches, country roads were bad, especially in the

N.Z. LISTENER, DECEMBER 30, 1949.