

THE LAND OF RATA AND GOLD

They're Tough, and They're Rough, But They're Kind, On The Coast

HOSPITALITY on the West Coast is not a tradition, or a byword, or anything like that, it is a fetish. Unless you are obviously "on the scrounge," the people of Westland will feed you and fete you until you can hold no more food and begin to blush at their bounty of kindness.

It would not be advisable to say about the West Coast some of the things that have been said in *The Listener* about other provinces. They have a forthright way of settling arguments on the other side of the big hills. They will listen to your opinion, consider it by their lights, and ignore you or knock you down if they decide to disagree. It is, of course, much more efficient to knock you down. Always they make themselves perfectly clear.

Luckily, there is little to be said about Westland that a Coaster could not construe as favourable. Insult him in the correct manner and he will love you as a brother. But insults are out of place. The people of Westland have all the simple virtues; and their vices, being also simple, seem virtuous too. The land itself is made of a rich, simple stuff. Anything will attain a prolific growth in the semi-tropical air over the potent river flats. In the wild hills and mountains lies the contrast of a different sort of simplicity. Crags cut smooth as billiard slate, or rough like the crosscut saws busy in the bush below, rise out of steaming forest, glaciers flow steep beside hot springs, and gold stumbles down the rivers as ice and water scour it out of the rock.

With all this wilderness crowding round them, the people of the West Coast needs must take from it something of their life and personality.

Land of Rapid Change

Leave a clearing in the bush for a month and creepers will disguise the stumps and tangle the fallen limbs so that all the work must be done over again. Cut a trail this year, and next year all you will find to follow will be the blaze marks on the trunks of the bigger trees. Drop a bridge across the river to-day and to-morrow the water will take it away in some sudden half-hour flood. Cross a quiet stream in the morning, and when you come back at night you will find it risen 50 feet and rolling 50-ton boulders as a boy rolls marbles. Clear a hillside of bush for the sake of the grazing pasture on the rich soil beneath and a week or two of a rain that falls at 200-inches-per-year will sweep it clear of all but the bare rock foundations. Make up your mind to be energetic and enterprising, and to-morrow the damp heat of the flats and the hothouse atmosphere of the bush, the smell of things growing and things rotting, will persuade you, gently, that on the Coast it is not worth while. It is necessary only to live, to work a little for a living, to eat, to sleep, to take the rain with the sunshine, to bestir yourself only when the occasion demands it.

They Refuse to Worry

Not that they sit all day thinking, or just sitting. A day's work on the West Coast is a full

day's work. Any atmosphere of resignation induced by the climate and the lotus-like flora is only mental. If a West Coaster appears as a person who can't be worried, it is only because he really refuses to worry. He goes quietly about his jobs. If a thing can be done, he does it. If it can't be done, well to hell, isn't there gold in the creeks, and along the beaches, food in the bush, wood for fires?



BETWEEN BUSH AND BEACH: The famous Pancake Rocks, looking south from Punakaiki, Westland — typical of the province's coastal scenery

In actual fact, a day's work on the Coast can take as much energy as a week's work anywhere else. If he doesn't feel like it, the Coaster will not exert himself. But if he does feel inclined that way he will outstrip any man at any job — and he can do most.

Back to the Bush

He may be in town for a while, trying his hand at carpentering, plumbing, painting, or keeping books. Then one day he is gone, into the bush with a great load on his back, or off down the coast with a pan hanging from his pack and a shovel on his shoulder. For a while he will fight the devil himself to get where he wants to go, and do what he wants when he arrives. He may spend a week covering three miles of some river gorge, up and down over the bluffs, through the rotting logs and the undergrowth, swimming deep pools and crawling over water-green boulders. When he arrives the bush and the rain will claim him. Wekas will learn where he lives and come curiously to examine his habits or steal his crumbs. He will be alone but not lonely for as long as he pleases, and he will return to be welcomed in the towns again when towns seem attractive.

Down in the Mines

Or perhaps he is a miner, working in those lung-destroying quartz drives, where every breath means a day less life, where every year means another

wheeze in the chest, where life is hard as the rock they drill and as cheap as they are careless of it. Pthisis is the enemy. He knows the cause, and feels the effect pressing against his ribs. He has his own ideas about countering it. He knows that it must get him if he stays to breathe the dust from the drills, but the true tunneller is lost out of the shaft. Usually he faces the music, delaying the inevitable with an occasional change of scenery. He has not much faith in fresh air, but finds that work with coal will shift some of the growing deposit at the bottom of his lungs. Even a little drilling into brittle greywacke may help him. Coal dust he can shift, and with it the fine quartz particles that tend to harden back into the solid as he breathes and swallows them. Rested, he will soon be back in the long, hard game of drilling for the precious metal. Nowadays the pneumatic drill speeds but scarcely lessens his labour. Sometimes fans clear the air for him. It is all the same. So long as he is in the tunnel he will take what comes.

There is no finer sight than the sight of a good tunneller in action: rolling the great hammer over his shoulder, hitting the drill squarely with every telling stroke, over and under to the right, or to the left. Each time he hits the drill, dust spits out. Each blow means another fraction from the face. Crouching beside him is the tunneller's mate, often as expert as he, and fit to take a turn at the day-long slogging of iron against iron on the rock. Follows the cunning coolness of laying and lighting the fuses

so that the face comes off clean, the spell while the drive clears of fumes, the sharpening of drills, with eyes tuned to the change of colour that means proper temper in the metal. Then at it again, impatient till the job is done. One tunnel finished they're off to another, unless they feel inclined to go down country and make it really worth while, and necessary, to earn some more money.

The March of Civilisation

Such is the stuff of which the Coast is made. They are tough, careless, and kind. Each year they accept more and more of the amenities of civilisation. From across the mountains come newspapers, aeroplanes, radio, more train services, new machines to build new roads.

They accept them. Where a trail has been good enough for years they find a road serves much the same purpose. Mails are still mails, whether they travel for a week on the back of a horse or arrive by air in an hour.

Luxuries are superficial. The true heart of Westland is in the bush, or by the golden sands. The outside world may drill tunnels through the ranges separating them, fling roads across the hills, charge down their trees with great tractors, sell them insurance, or new ways of growing cattle into beef, but the Coast cannot really be changed. Nature's ways over there are too hearty. They stand for no interference.