

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

SETTLERS AND PIONEERS. By James Cowan. New Zealand Centennial Surveys. Published by Department of Internal Affairs. Editor, E. H. McCormick.

MR. COWAN disarms possible critics by announcing in his opening sentence that he has not attempted to write a systematic history. His aim has been "to place before the reader some of the salient features of pioneer life in its more adventurous aspects," and most readers will feel that they get their money's worth. He belongs in time to the days that followed the explorers, but did not quite extend into this century, and in place to the frontier, as he likes to call it, fringing the belt of organised settlement. His youth and early manhood were spent on "the edge of danger land" facing the King Country. He can remember a shooting and a tomahawking, fortunately only one, and he lived through the long period of anxiety during which the Maoris were expected to strike almost every day. His book is not therefore a record of things that he has read in other books, but chiefly the memory of days that he has lived.

There is, however, one obvious criticism that it will be well to make at once. New Zealand consists of two islands, and Mr. Cowan has spent nearly all his long life in one. He certainly knows the South Island better than many South Islanders know the North Island, but the fact that he set out to give his own experiences, or to give them mainly, necessarily made it a North Island story. It is true that two-thirds of the people of New Zealand now live in the North Island. But they were not living there in the 'sixties or the 'seventies or the 'eighties. Mr. Cowan will not, therefore, satisfy South Island readers, and one can't say much more in his defence than that he has not tried to satisfy them. He glances at the South Island, but says quite frankly that he is "chiefly concerned with the frontiers"; and by frontiers he means the Upper Waikato, the King Country borders, Taranaki, and the Bay of Plenty, "where the settler long after the actual military campaigns with horse, foot and artillery, was compelled to fight to hold the confiscated land that often by moral right belonged to the Maori."

It is necessary to make that criticism, but it is not in fact very serious. Reading is one thing and living another, and nothing that

Mr. Cowan could have done in the way of research would have given reality to second-hand impressions. There would also have been a space problem if he had attempted to cover the whole Dominion instead of less than a quarter of one Island. In any case, the things he does not tell us must not stand in the way of the things he does tell, and does personally recall, nor must we complain of his way of telling them. He has been young and now he is old. He thinks that life was freer and happier and richer in the Waikato of his boyhood than it is to-day, when so much of the Waikato consists of spick-and-span farms intersected by roads that are better than the streets of the capital cities were when he was a boy. He looks back and sees this:

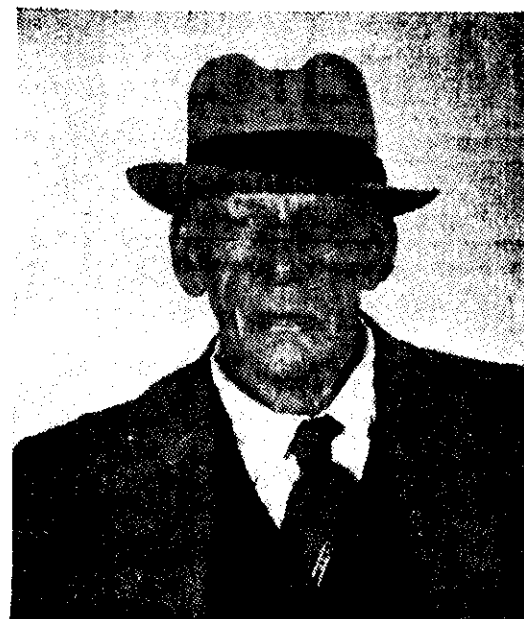
"The first home I knew, the first trees and flowers, were on the soil that had less than ten years before been a battleground. The place had originally been a grant to a Waikato militia officer, who sold it. The farm lay with a gentle tilt to the north. Wheat was much grown and gave large yields. Memory lingers on the many peach groves and cherry groves, Maori planted, laden with the largest and sweetest fruit ever grown."

Why should memory not linger there? They had everything they wanted, even though they sold their butter for 4d a pound and "took it out in groceries." Life to him now, and to hundreds of others of his generation, is not up-to-date, but down-to-date (again his own term). He is entitled to say this so long as he does not say it too often, and if he gives reasons. Here are reasons:

"To the youthful mind, that knew no other life, it was endless comfort. . . The only sound from the outside dark [was] the sharp wailing call of the weka in the swamp and the bittern's occasional muffled boom. . . There were no orchard pests. . . We dealt with our pigs on the farm, and we had a hand in every stage of the process from sty to kitchen. How often I think now at breakfast time or thereabouts of that airy old kitchen with its rafters all hung with our hoard of home-cured bacon! . . . The dairy farm nowadays is often a bare, comfortless place. The ground for plantations is begrudged; most of the trees are felled; there are fewer orchards. . . . We were not slaves to that exasperating animal [the cow]. We were not all standardised by radio and cinema and motor-car and labour-saving machinery. . . . These sophisticated, cinema-sated young folk of to-day cannot imagine what a treat it was to us, that show of the Tennessee Minstrels, with old Bill Kelly and his white whiskers in the chair. Bill and the sergeant and the rest of them — they have all gone where the good niggers go."

And there were heroes of a different stature:

"We frequently saw Te Kooti in those years 1884-1889. He was a man of middle size, with grey hair and sparse grey beard. His features



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were finely cut, his strong nose aquiline, his expression determined, dogged. He was not tattooed, his frame was spare, his shoulders slightly stooped. One of his hands was mangled by a Government bullet in the 1869 campaign. The war-worn veteran and spiritual medicine man often passed through Kihikihi township attended by his faithful cavalcade. In his latter days he rode in a buggy with his two wives, stern, resolute-looking women who composed his bodyguard against revengeful attack by some old enemy. Reputedly each carried a loaded revolver in her blouse."

That means far more to us in New Zealand than "once seeing Shelley plain."

With some little difficulty, one feels, Mr. Cowan has held the balance even between Maori and pakeha. He knows how the early settlers felt, how real their anxieties were, and with what patience and courage they endured them. But it is clear that he would have liked to paraphrase Burke: "Had I been a Maori, as I was a pakeha, I never would have laid down my arms—never, never, never!"

These problems, however, he has examined, and pronounced judgment on, in another place. In this book his task was to tell us what life was like from about the middle of the century to its turn, so he rounds off his personal narrative, not as this hasty review may have suggested so far, by a recital of his complaints against the present age, but by a series of thumb-nail sketches of institutions and persons of the golden age of his youth—the smithy, the country doctor, the country parson, horses and riders. One of his riders covered 200 miles in two days, not to see a man about a dog, but to "court his Kate," who lived 100 miles away across unbridged streams. Were the girls more beautiful then or fewer, or was it simply that the grass tracks were easier on horses' legs? Mr. Cowan does not say.