

THE POET BECOMES A POLITICIAN

Thomas Bracken: Author of Our National Song

[II.]

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In our last issue was told the story of the life of Thomas Bracken up to the time he wrote "God Defend New Zealand," now officially accepted as our national song. This article continues with Bracken's life story.

AFTER ten years in New Zealand Bracken was widely known, especially in Otago. He had written "God Defend New Zealand" in the early 'seventies, his topical verse was well known in the Dunedin "Saturday Advertiser," he had produced a popular tourist booklet, and had written "Not Understood."

In 1881 his popularity led to a request that he stand for Parliament in the Dunedin Central electorate. He accepted, supported a Liberal policy, and was elected. Railway employees gave him a heavy vote.

At the next elections in 1884 he was beaten by J. V. Bradshaw, by three votes; but he recovered the seat by a two to one majority after Bradshaw's death in 1886. In 1887 he withdrew his candidature. That year Sir Robert Stout, leader of the Liberal Party, was defeated in Dunedin by Sir James Allen.

Bracken did not stand again for Parliament, but he had already put his name firmly between the pages of Hansard.

Sang in Parliament

He refused to tie himself to Party considerations and spoke out strongly for the betterment of social conditions. He supported the move for the eight-hour day and was respected by the House for strict political principles as much as he was liked for his geniality. He liked to put some verse quotations into his speeches. Once, when he had quoted Thomas Moore's "Behave Yourself Afore Folk," a Member called to him to sing it. Bracken obliged and created a record which even Mr. Sullivan and the "Isle of Capri" have never equalled.

Freed from political ties, Bracken was able to give more time to the sale of his book of poems entitled "Musings in Maoriland." An effort had already been made to extend the sales in Australia, but the canvasser had not had much success, and Bracken resolved to do the job himself.

"God's Own Country"

He proved to be a good salesman, and sold himself to the Australians to the extent of 1,000 copies. The Melbourne Exhibition was on at the time and Bracken enjoyed himself immensely in the company of all the celebrities assembled there for the occasion: Bland Holt, J. C. Williamson, Harry Rickards, and other leading lights of the theatrical world were included among his acquaintances.

It was at this time that he received the inspiration for his long poem "God's Own Country." In Melbourne's Collins Street he met two other New Zealanders. One asked the other how he liked Australia. "It's a wonderful place," came the answer, "but I'm going back to God's Own Country." Bracken went home and wrote his poem on the spot. He believed, himself, that this was his masterpiece.

Bracken And The Professor

He may or may not have been the best judge of his own work. Time seems to have selected "Not

Understood" for most fame as a poem, and "God Defend New Zealand" for fame as a song; but G. W. Otterson, who prepared a biography for broadcast by the original Station 2YA on September 19, 1929, recorded that Professor Sutherland, of Melbourne University, disagreed with some of the author's views of himself.

Bracken was selling the Professor a copy of his book. "Aren't you the author of 'Dear Old Bendigo'?" asked the Professor. Bracken proudly acknowledged ownership. "Well," said the Professor,

17 September 1873

I J Woods Esq,

Dear Sir

I hereby give you the sole
right to print and publish the New Zealand
National Hymn "God Defend New Zealand"
I resign the Copyright into your
hands from this date to use in whatever
manner you please.

I am Dear Sir

Yours truly
Thos Bracken

A copy of the letter written by Thomas Bracken in which he assigned the rights of "God Defend New Zealand" to John J. Woods, who composed the music of our national song

"it's the worst thing I've read, and it should not be in any edition like this."

Bracken threw the book at the Professor's feet in disgust, but next morning received a cheque for its cost and a note from the Professor: "I still maintain that 'Bendigo' is utter rubbish."

It must be admitted that Bracken's "Bendigo" was not a perfect example of poetic form:

I can't help laughing when I think—old
mate, just pass a chew—
Of that 'ere time when Murphy's team got
boggled at Carlsruhe.
Big Barney shouted—whilst the wheels were
bedding low—
"Faix boys, there's some deep sinkin' on the
road to Bindigo."

Just as frankly it must be said that much of his other poetry was not the stuff that finds its way into the best anthologies. Bracken's gorges had a way of being grand every time he mentioned them, and for

him the wind always whistled, the leaves always rustled, the torrents roared, the farmsteads smiled, and Egmont was Monarch of the Mountains, with Cook in icy armour guarding pyramids of snow.

Seddon Was Delighted

However, if that poem has not lasted quite as well as some, the title for it has stuck, and New Zealanders still like to think of New Zealand as "God's Own Country," whether the phrase is used out of genuine pride or just to annoy Australians and Americans, and other claimants to the original site of the Garden of Eden.

Richard Seddon was delighted with the idea of attaching this label to the New Zealand he was so busy reforming, and he adopted "God's Own Country" enthusiastically. By way of reciprocity, Bracken coined another phrase by calling Seddon "King Dick." King Dick he became and remained until after his death.

Bracken was not in these days making a great deal of money, but luck returned temporarily when hard times sent him back to Dunedin. In an old box stored in his Rattray Street home he found a bag of 200 half sovereigns, saved up sometime and forgotten. Then a Wellington firm published "Lays and Lyrics," the volume that includes the poem "God's Own Country," and in 1894 he was appointed Bill Reader in the House of Representatives. He held this office through two sessions, resigned because of ill health, and died two years later in straitened circumstances. His wife survived him by a few years. His son, C. C. Bracken, is at present on the Auckland staff of New Zealand Railways.

A Decoration To His Times

In material things, Bracken died with no history of success behind him. For other considerations, he remains an outstanding personality. Whatever his virtues as a poet, his existence brightened the times in which he lived. He was a sort of rough diamond in a rough and homely age and some of his facets sparkled with a brilliance which must have seemed strange to a practically-minded Colonial people for whom anyone connected with such arts as journalism and matching rhymes was a being somewhat apart. But he commanded respect for more than his ability to shear a sheep or drive a waggon when he was not writing. He was known as an honest man of sincere liberal principles. If his forthright criticisms of the existing scheme of things were not always in line with current political philosophy, they were still respected for the feeling that inspired them. "The fact that we are not buried is no proof that we are alive," was one of his sayings, and he spent his life trying to live up to it. He acknowledged no limitations and announced his inmost thoughts with no more restraint than he put upon his pocket when it came to helping others.

As a literary figure his chief claim to fame in these days of more sophisticated criticism is that he was one of the first to try to put his country into words and rhyming metres. As a man he will be remembered as a decoration to his times.

(Concluded)