

NEW ZEALAND'S GREATEST BOOK

A Tribute To Guthrie-Smith

(Abridged from a talk by J. W. HEENAN)

The last literary task carried out by W. H. Guthrie-Smith before his death, only a few days ago, was the writing of the text of "The Changing Land," one of the pictorial surveys now being issued by the Department of Internal Affairs. That survey will be available to the public about the end of this year. A month or two earlier he also completed the Third Edition of "Tutira," and the MS is now with his publishers

CHARLES LAMB, in his "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading," airily lumped together Court Calendars, Directories, Draught Boards bound and lettered on the back, Scientific Treatises, Almanacs, Statutes at Large, and the works of sundry Eighteenth Century worthies, including no less than Gibbon himself, as items from the catalogue of books which are no books. But literature, after all, is written language. Language exists for the expression of thought, and it is the quality of that expression which constitutes literature.

"Tutira," by W. H. Guthrie-Smith, which I regard as New Zealand's greatest contribution to literature, was first published by Blackwoods in 1921 in an edition of 1,000 copies at two guineas each, the exhausting of which led to a second edition in 1926 of the same number of copies at the same price. That edition, too, has long since been exhausted, and it is significant of the regard held for "Tutira" by purchasers

that second-hand copies are very rarely available. Even the libraries seem jealous in their possession of it, since every library copy I have seen is labelled, so to speak, "Noli me tangere," in other words, "reference only." "Tutira," so far as its contents are generally available, is probably known mostly through citation as an authority in scientific papers on a variety of subjects. For the rest, it is one of those books that are known rather by repute than by reading.

A Story, Not a Treatise

Though I have claimed that treatment, and not subject matter, constitutes the art of literature, subject is of importance. It is time I told those of you who do not know "Tutira" that, in the words of its sub-title, it is "The Story of a New Zealand Sheep Station." How has Guthrie-Smith told that story? Rather than in any feeble summary of mine, let it be told in the author's own serene style in the preface to the first edition:

So vast and so rapid have been the alterations which have occurred in New Zealand during the past forty years, that even those who, like myself, have noted them day by day, find it difficult to connect past and present—the pleasant past so completely obliterated, the changeful present so full of possibility. These alterations are not traceable merely in the fauna, avifauna, and flora of the Dominion, nor are they only to be noted on the physical surface of the countryside: more profound, they permeate the whole outlook in regard to agriculture, stock-raising, and land tenure.

The story of Tutira is the record of such change noted on one sheep-station in one province. Should its pages be found to contain matter of any permanent interest, it will be owing to the fact that the life portrayed has for ever vanished, the conditions sketched passed away beyond recall. A virgin countryside cannot be restocked; the vicissitudes of its pioneers cannot be re-enacted; its invasion by alien plants, animals, and birds, cannot be repeated; its ancient vegetation cannot be resuscitated—the words "terra incognita" have been expunged from the map of little New Zealand.

This preface gives the clue to the greatness of "Tutira." It is a story, not a dry-as-dust compilation of fact. The very conception of it is a stroke of genius. As you read, the illusion of something living grows until you become possessed with the feeling that you are having the very soul of a being bared to your understanding. Tutira, the station, is no longer a mere patch of land, a stage on which sundry humans and other animate things strut their little hour. It is itself a person, a person of strength, nobility, and fine feeling.

Everything of Tutira, the station, that the record and system of science can unfold for us of its geological and botanical history, and of its bird and animal life; everything of the period of its native occupation that one steeped in Maori lore and history and understanding of the Maori people can expound for us; everything that a miraculous observation has noted of its growth since European settlement; everything that a fine mind and sympathetic soul can realise for us of the struggles of pioneer man in the wilderness—all that and much more is told in the book "Tutira."



W. H. GUTHRIE-SMITH

Magic in the Telling

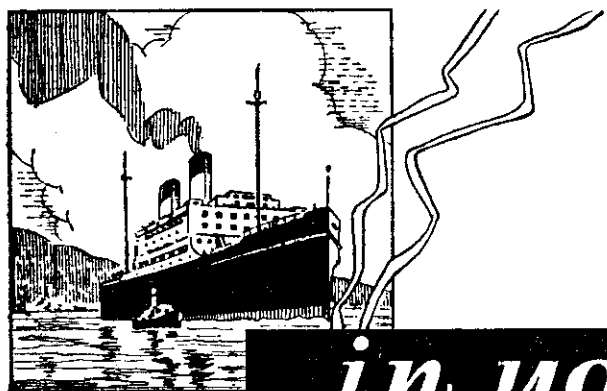
The telling is everything in any story. "Tutira" could have been a scientific treatise, a text-book, a succession of learned papers to be read before a Philosophical Society bored to the bone, a Departmental report, the findings of a Royal Commission, the record of a geological, botanic, ornithological, ethnological, or sociological survey. According to your taste, or your intellectual or scientific or official interest, it is all these and, as such, would have a permanent value. But it is miraculously something more, something different, not in degree but in kind.

"Children of the Church"

It is a glory, for instance, of this great book, that the most humdrum matters of fact are put to the reader in such a way that he sees not a bare record of this or that but a vision conjured up for him by a magician of words. Open it at random and you may light on the chapter "Children of the Church." Is this some fairy tale of choir boys—Sunday-schools? No, but listen to Guthrie-Smith opening this explanation of certain aspects of the alien vegetation of Tutira:

Another lot of Tutira aliens has carried a message which assuredly no other group of plants has anywhere been privileged to bear. They have reached the station as heralds preparing the way, forerunners making the path straight for the coming of a King. I can never view a row of thyme or clump of mint on the long-deserted site of a far inland pa—gifts brought from afar of frankincense and myrrh—without seeming to hear their native carrier tell his tale of the mission garden whence the plant had sprung, of the white men from across the sea, of their strange new gospel of peace and goodwill. Assuredly not one of these mission garden aliens, these children of the church, has been handled, tasted, or smelled, without discussion of the donor, the austere example of his life, his beliefs. . . . As in Antioch, the followers of the new faith were earliest known by the name of its founder, so during discus-

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