

DIFFERENT—BUT THE SAME

From Barons To Ballots

FOR the Minister of the Crown who attended, for the Director of the National Service Department who drew out the marbles, for the Magistrate who watched him in the name of justice, for the assistants who plucked out the cards as the numbers were called, for the accountants checking, the messengers running, the typists clattering out the results, and for the men selected, the ballot for soldiers last week was visible proof of time's changes.

The counting machines, the dictaphones, the cameras, the arc lights, and the view itself from eight floors up above Wellington, cried aloud that this was 1940.

But in some respects the ballot was a reminder for those who cared to be reminded that the more we change the more we remain the same.

COUNTER LUNCH

(Continued from previous page)

But already, before the tray has even crossed the small space between the door and the bar counter the plates are depleted and a dozen hands followed mine. On the plate there remains only one small potato, in a congealing pool of fat.

At first I am loth to take it. It seems that it might be discourteous to be the one who leaves the plate empty. I hesitate. I think of the food I have in my room, and the gas meter with no shilling to set it going. I think of these things and as I think my hand comes up from my pocket and before my eyes it begins to travel towards the plate.

Again I am too late. My hand arrives to find the plate empty.

The last drop of beer, as I knew would happen, goes down without feeling or flavour and I have no longer any excuse to remain. I come out, and here I am.

THAT is all my story. Did you take it all down?

My, you are fast with your shorthand. Let me see! How smart you are. I'll bet you have a good job. I'll bet you have a good place to go. Now I have not often had to do this sort of thing, but to-night it is different. I was really brought up and educated quite well, and I tell the truth when I say I do not like doing it. Well, I mean to say—could you lend me a shilling please?

Thank you! Thank you!

WHEN knights were bold and there were no radios or newspapers, one knight, bolder than the others, would send round word by his esquire or errant boy that there was prospect of battle by the time the full moon shone again. Whereat the various other knights would polish their hauberks and swords, give the well-tried charger a last meal, and make off with their ladies' scarves floating from their lances.

When all these knights had got together, they would line up on one side of a good flat piece of ground and wait making wassail while the other side got ready. After a time all would be in order and the enemies would charge one upon the other. After the charge an umpire would count the corpses and decide who had won. Everyone would then return, the losers disconsolate, the winners the richer by as many varlets and other spoils of war as they could collect.

Minstrels would then harp on the subject until everybody was called out again. The ladies by now would have more chiffon and the blacksmiths would have the dents in the fenders all straightened out.

So at any rate we might imagine, if our sole source of information was the literature of chivalry.

In the Modern Manner

To-day the method is certainly different. The ladies sit with their knitting needles and the rest is all a matter of a card index. Some of the ladies who are not knitting are sitting in a big room in Wellington making a tremendous row with a battery of typewriters. Instead of arrows with notes stuck in the shaft, fired through the balcony window at dead o' night, the warriors get registered letters in the post calling them up for military service.

The First Ballot

Sir Launcelot would have been amazed if he had been last week in the headquarters of the National Service Department.

It was the week of the first ballot of the second world war in New Zealand. Territorial regiments required filling up and the marbles were used to decide who should do the filling.

Over the length of a long table the steel trays containing the ballot cards, each with its name and number, were placed. For the Auckland regiments, whose turn came first when the ballot began, there were thirty trays of cards. Each time the Director of National Service, watched over by a Magistrate, picked out a marble from the cylinder and called its numbers, assistants selected the card in that numerical position in each of the thirty trays.

Through a long system of checks and precautions, this card then went to typists, who copied out the particulars on it, using carbons to make one notice

calling up the man, one for filing in the Department, and one for use by the Government Printer in preparing the Gazette.

This whole process would take a week. As soon as the Gazette was printed the postmen would be ready with their registered letters, 16,000 of them, and the army would be almost on the way to its training camp.

Another Comparison

No less different from methods of even half a century ago will be the use to which this army will be put in the field if ever it goes into action. Wars are no longer the affair of knights and squires. Battles are no longer fought between two sides drawn carefully up on the field ready to fight until one or the other gives in.

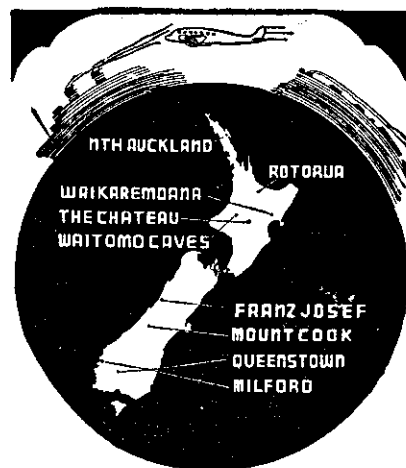
A plain on which a hundred thousand men would fight to a finish one hundred years ago is now only an incident in the progress of an army on wheels, or a small target for the striking power of an army on wings. Milady's favours are posted to her beloved at so much an ounce and take the form, as often as not, of plum cake or woollen underwear, instead of silken cloth.

Back on Our Tracks

But is it so different after all, fundamentally? The postman is doing much the same job as the messenger who ran from tribe to tribe calling the countryside to arms in the days before men could read. The Director of National Service is keeping very much the same sort of records as William the Conqueror kept, and the radio is saying very much the same things about it all as the kings and commanders used to say to their men in their oration before engagements. Mr. Churchill with his cigar is a modern metamorphosis of Richard the Lion-Heart and his battle axe, and Hitler's historical counterparts are even easier to place.

It is the great tragedy of the war that it sends us so far back on our tracks. Although it is not true that we have returned to the Middle Ages, it is a fact that we are not nearly so far forward as in our simplicity so many of us had supposed.

Every ballot is a solemn reminder that the ape and the tiger are not dead; that we have not yet worked out the savagery in mankind; and that each in his turn must do battle against the beast.



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