

# SOWING WILD OATS

(Written for "The Listener" by G. E. Fitzpatrick)

TO go or not to go, that was the question which I put to myself on the wharf at Port Lyttelton long years ago. The Sydney boat bearing many of my late workmates, Aussie shearers, was due to sail and the wanderlust was in my blood. And when I look back over the years and remember the impetuous young New Zealander that I then was, I have no regrets, not even when I consider the escapades that the sowing of wild oats led me into. One thing my wanderings brought home to me was a realisation of the beauty and bounteous natural resources of New Zealand. After travelling in Australia I learned to appreciate what a good water supply means to any land.

Some of my Aussie shearer friends were pretty good hands at the pleasant occupation of wild oat sowing, and Sydney is an ideal place for such pastime; but the sower of wild oats is apt to forget the passage of time and the dwindling finances, so before I was embarrassed for funds I paid a few

weeks' board and lodging in advance. My new home was near the waterfront over Pymont bridge and my landlord earned a fair living by tattooing people. Here it was that I met people from all walks of life, from the Grandee lady to the cockney fireman; and just as varied as the people were their tastes in tattoo designs which ranged from Tommy Burns and Jack Johnson in the ring to grave stones with sentimental epitaphs written thereon. Here I met negroes from American ships and Hindus who sold Cashmere shawls and smuggled tobacco and sometimes opium at bed-rock prices. Sailors from the seven seas gathered in the hotel bar close by, a carefree cosmopolitan crowd who took things as they came, whether it was someone else's property or some of the punches that were about when the corks were popping freely.

## Off with My Swag

But too quickly the novel experience of fraternising with these seafarers and tattoo addicts came to an end, and as the Tommy soldiers used to say during the Great War, I was "for it." Sydney or the bush meant to me the bush. So here I was in a new land with the swag as my comrade on another adventure, for that is how I looked on such matters in those days; and I would advise any-

one who wants to know a country and its people thoroughly to walk and talk with the inhabitants. More will be learned that way than by years of reading and radio drama.

Going out of Sydney is rather harder than going out of Wellington or Auckland. There are so many travellers on the main thoroughfare that the residents have grown wise to the value of a notice board on the front gate which reads "Beware of the dog." This keeps away many hungry swaggers but it does not deter the old members of the swaggers' union (free membership). They know where the dogs are, and are not; they even know where the real savage dogs are, and whether they are tied or loose. I met and talked with some of these old hands, they were great company and had a great fund of stories and a sense of humour that nothing could suppress. It takes a bit of courage to knock at the door of a house and ask for food; I used to be pretty hungry sometimes—I was not hardened up to this way of life, but before my journey ended I became quite proficient.

## Warm Welcomes

The people I called on were fine types of Aussies, much the same in temperament and generosity as the Anzacs, who years later were my comrades in arms. One chap whom I met asked me to dine with him; he remarked that he saw so many travellers that he could tell the professional from the casual like myself. He said that one chap called every year about the same time; maybe he was an official of the hobos' union sent over this road to report on the dog population and notices, for the benefit of fellow unionists.

I was travelling on the Sydney-Goulburn road and one day I came to an imposing gateway bearing a coat of arms. I had doubts about going in here for food, it looked such a grand place, but at last I went in. The lady at the kitchen door treated me like a rich uncle and I left with almost a sugar bag of good food, and the fates were still kinder to me when I found 2/6 on the dusty road; who shall say that providence does not look after the wanderer. Further on when I called at a store in a small town I learned that the place with the coat of arms on the gate was the Governor's country residence. If I had known that before I might not have entered the imposing gates.

## Weatherbound

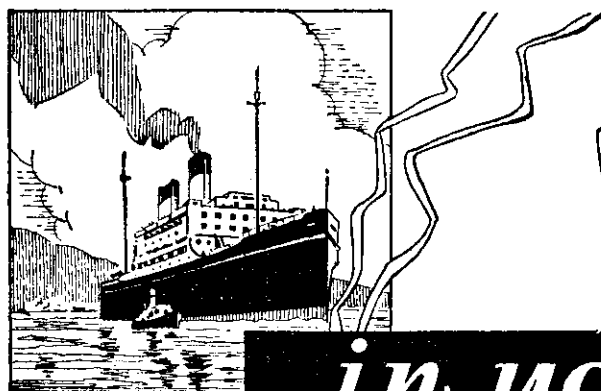
I came late one evening to an hotel that had been abandoned by the licensee. It seemed to be a rendezvous for travellers, and there were runaway sailors from the American fleet which was then at Sydney, and a dozen or so fair dinkum Aussies, two negroes and one Chinaman, the first I had seen "on the wallaby," as the Aussies call swagging.

It started to rain that evening and we were weatherbound for three days. During that time I had a fine opportunity to study my fellow travellers, and what a wealth of talent there was under their rough exterior. Singers, especially a negro baritone, were there who with youthful tuition might have developed into stars, and a conjuror who was a veritable Houdini. During our stay here the country around us for a radius of five miles was given the best (or is it the worst) combing it could possibly get by the hungry hobos. I'll bet the settlers wished the old pub to go up in flames before another wet period.

My journey brought me to Goulburn on Christmas eve; I passed the big gaol with its high walls and sentries on duty. I thought as I passed its forbidding structure that any poor old swagger was better off than the inmates of such a place. Liberty is such a precious thing that the sight of that gaol sort of pulled me up with a bump from deep down in me. The thought had dawned that may be those inmates had started like me first by swagging and then perhaps when they were really hard up they had slipped into stealing and so step by step had gone down the social ladder. In after years I was glad of this little episode creeping into my travels; the mere thought of it was a tonic to me because it braced me against anything that would endanger my liberty.

I kept away from the main road leading into Goulburn and had just got clear of the town when I came on a small group, a man and two children searching for something on the dusty road. So after a little searching I was lucky enough to find the half-crown and sent the two children rejoicing on their way. And here again a trivial incident led my path from nowhere in particular to

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