

A SCHOOLMASTER LOOKS AT AMERICA

EARLY in 1938 the Principal of Rangiora High School (J. E. Strachan) went to the United States with his wife to "look at America." As a teacher he was interested primarily in educational trends; but even if education could be understood without reference to social and political questions, Mr. Strachan is not the kind of man who could study it from that narrow angle. To him schools and colleges express, or ought to express, the life of the community from which they spring, and his examination of American schools became therefore an examination of the American scene as a whole.

But he did more than look at America. He thought about it, and he wrote his impressions week by week for the benefit of the teachers and students in his own school. Then by good luck, these letters returned again to the United States, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, whose guest he had been during his travels, had them put into a book and published by Columbia University Press. Instead of reviewing it, we give extracts at random which show, not only the kind of man the author is, but, with great vividness, the kind of country America is in those places seen by a school-teacher on tour. (Our copy has reached us through the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.)

ON THE WAY

"ON most nights we have a picture entertainment in the lounge [on the ship]. It is poor stuff as a rule. I often think there is more real drama in the audience than on the screen, if one had the wit to see it. Here, for example, are some of the real actors among the cabin-class passengers. At my table is a man who has been a mining prospector for forty years. He claims to have located more gold than any other man alive. He once took half a dozen burros into Death Valley and located the first gold found there. In Rhodesia after copper, he travelled with a writer who contracted brain fever during the expedition. He got him back to America, but the man never fully recovered and ultimately blew his brains out at Colorado Springs. At some time or other he has been on the main mining areas from Alaska to Waihi. Mostly he is very talkative, but there are times when he drinks silently, seriously and alone."

THERE

"WE are in America. To convince ourselves we bought a newspaper in Los Angeles. Here are some of the headlines:

Fitt Demands Bomb Probe Police Be Suspended.

Hit Wright's "White Flame" Alibi.

Sift Death Blast at Du Pont Plant. Sec. Board of Directors Halted by Council.

Hunt Higher-ups in Japan Ship Blast Plot.

Behead China Gen.: Give Him Fine Coffin.

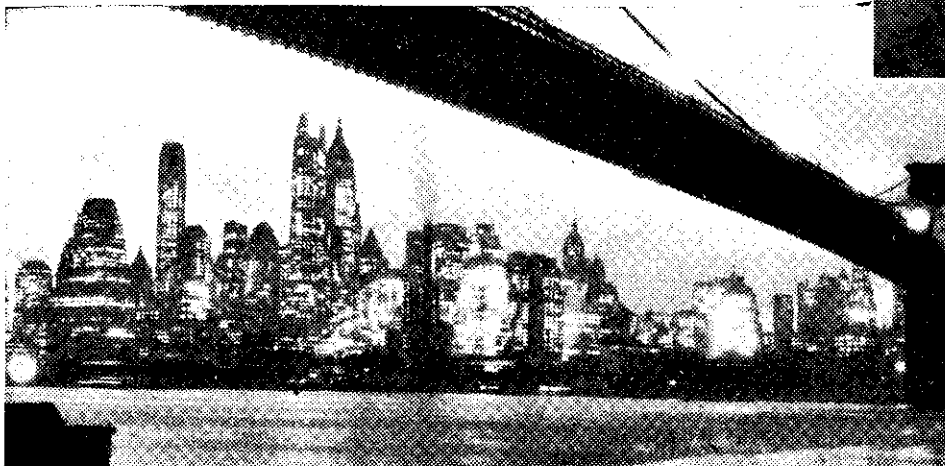
Flipper Flaps 3 Miles to Ranch and Return.

Housing Bill Side Tracked in Anti-Lunch Bill.

Victim of Sneezing Gets Whistling Ear. Is it childishness, insanity, or just that Americans talk another language? The last, I think—a language that is to ours as gin sling is to buttermilk. But why on earth should a newspaper think it worth while to devote half a column to tell us that a society woman at a New York dinner table spilt some berries on the tablecloth? Here is a new scale of values to which we must accustom ourselves."

SAN FRANCISCO

"IN spite of school engagements, we have managed to see a good deal of this lively city. In some ways it is too lively. On Sunday afternoon we thought it would be a good idea to get out of the noise, so with visions of our quiet Wai-kuku beach at home, we went out to one of San Francisco's beaches on this



Above: J. E. STRACHAN: He looked and thought too. Left: Manhattan's Towers: "A magic city this"

side of the Pacific. Unfortunately for us, half the populace seemed to have the same idea. They had left the city, certainly, but had brought its din with them. They were disporting themselves on scenic railways, hooplas, merry-mix-ups and dozens of other tonic devices of the whirlwind and catapult variety. Oh, day of rest!"

LOS ANGELES

"BY good luck we saw a (film) shot made. What a fake it was!—the knock-out at the end of a boxing-match. The audience was hired. That is their job, to come along when called, sit here or sit there till things are ready, and, at the critical moment, get up and yell or throw their hats in the air. Probably they will do this half a dozen times before the director is satisfied. Then they go home and await a similar job, perhaps to-morrow, perhaps next week. I asked how they were paid, and was told that the salary was anything from five to a hundred dollars a day, but as the work of these extras is intermittent, they average less than three thousand dollars a year. They may have nothing to do for a couple of weeks, but must remain within call. Well, that is one of the new jobs in this strange world of ours. We learned of some extraordinary faking in these pictures, but I must not spoil any movie fan's enjoyment. These palatial houses, that daring gallop o'er the rocks, that hair-raising rescue from the burning building, that glutinous screen kiss!—no, I shan't say anything."

CHICAGO AND DETROIT

"SINCE coming to America, I have had growing evidence of a strange element of fear that seems to invade

every quarter of American life, from the Senate at Washington down to the man who sells hot dogs. Sometimes the fear gets into the newspaper headlines, but then, generally, it is named 'Hitler' or 'Japan' or 'Communism.' I am coming to believe that it is none of these, but rather just a nameless fear of a breakdown of the American way of life. Even in the [educational] conferences it was the dominant motif—the threat to American democracy which must be met by a new education. This explains, I think, what was a little puzzling to us in the speeches of American educators in the recent conference in New Zealand. I am beginning to understand that now . . .

"I saw [an interesting] type of school at the Ford factory in Detroit. Here the school is in its true setting, and is precisely an annex to the remarkable line-assembly plant that turns out a car in every four minutes by the clock. 'One man, one job,' if it's only tightening a nut on a passing engine block. The real brains are already mechanised, and the tiny fragment of intelligence still contributed by the attendant will doubtless soon be mechanised also. To ensure machine efficiency meantime, that fragment of intelligence has to be trained and speeded up to the school. May God have mercy upon us!"

DEMOCRACY

"WHATEVER the danger, American leaders believe that democracy is on trial. Educators say that the alternative to regimentation under some form of dictatorship, benevolent or

otherwise, is to be found in an enlightened, intelligent, and socially responsible body of citizens. And that, perhaps, is the major task of adolescent and adult education. To the onlooker it appears a gigantic task. The subversive influences of our world to-day are very potent, and unfortunately, they can use powerfully the main communication lines other than

the schools. Yet unless we are to give up all faith in humanity, the task of salvaging democracy is worth while. One could only wish that American educators would face it with less of the element of fear in their philosophy. I would give them their own Emerson again: 'O friend, never strike sail to a fear. Come into port greatly, or sail with God the seas. Not in vain you live, for every passing eye is cheered and refined by the vision.'

FROM A SKYSCRAPER

"ONCE I saw a tropic sunset in mid-ocean that transformed the world into an opalescent globe whose fiery heart seemed to blaze through to set the sky aflame. So might the world have been for a million years before life came. I have watched the sun set over the rim of the desert and shivered a little when at his going a swift chill from the void sky whispered across the barren waste. So it may be for a million years when life has gone from the earth. But now we are in the midst of time, and of life. The sun that now, in its setting, wreathes Manhattan's towers in fiery murk, has seen all that life means . . . A magic city this, yet founded on commerce; a city that, in the process of raising its towers upwards to the skies instead of sprawling outwards over all the available space, is finding a way to resolve the conflicts and confusion of its adolescence and is achieving an order, a spaciousness, a dignity, and a serenity worthy of the great nation that has built it."