

"I SHALL try to be impertinent in order to be amusing. In any case, my listeners can always discount any statement they don't like on the ground that I am a South African," said Dr. J. N. Findlay, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Otago, when opening a radio discussion with his wife (who is a New Zealander), on the subject of "The New Zealanders" in the Winter Course Series from 4YA recently.

Here is a condensation of the discussion:

**DR. FINDLAY:** The first thing that struck me about the New Zealanders was, of course, the obvious thing—their isolation and insularity. Coming to live down here in Dunedin in the south of the South Island, in a city strangely placed in a setting of high mountains at the end of a long harbour where very few ships seemed to penetrate, and looking out on a wholly untenanted sea, I had at first the sensation of a man who has fallen down a high cliff on to a narrow ledge, where he must feed his gaze on an endless prospect of emptiness. The place I had come to seemed to connect with nothing and to be nowhere.

**Mrs. Findlay:** But couldn't you feel oriented by looking at a map, where everything is only a stone's throw away?

**Dr. F:** No, for the map always chilled me by presenting Antarctica as a closely neighbouring land-mass. . . . And it didn't at all suffice to blot out my memory of an infinity of boats, trains and ferries which would have to be dealt with before one could resume contact with familiar continents and territories.

**Mrs. F:** But the people? Surely they seemed ordinary and familiar?

**Dr. F:** By no means. The people seemed in some respects to share the qualities of their physical setting. They lived in a realm of their own, and were occupied with affairs of their own. They had queer hours for meals and many queer names for things, and many extraordinary customs. And quite naturally they didn't seem to be sufficiently aware of their remoteness or their isolation or their strangeness. All these, I may say, were impressions that have now worn off completely.

**Mrs. F:** I'm rather inclined to challenge your picture of the New Zealanders as a race of desert islanders. Surely there are few places on earth in which world affairs are regarded with greater interest? And surely there are few parts of the world where Imperial sentiment is stronger.

#### Following a Lead

**Dr. F:** I entirely grant what you say. It is simply the other side of the picture. Being remote, the New Zealanders compensate by being overwhelmingly interested in happenings on the other side of the globe. . . . But being remote, their success in following the lead of far-away fashions in thought and action is necessarily very imperfect. And there is also inevitably a considerable time-lag in it. So the impression persists that the New Zealanders are very isolated.

## Are We . . . Insular? Uncritical? Intolerant? Too Modest?



**DR. J. N. FINDLAY**  
He thinks we are . . .



**MRS. FINDLAY**  
But she defends us

**Mrs. F:** You think, no doubt, that the insularity of the New Zealanders is a very hopeless defect.

**Dr. F:** I am very far from thinking that. A certain amount of insularity is, in fact, essential to the formation of a true culture. Great cultures are invariably selective: they are not indiscriminately affected by everything that goes on around them, but only by such things as they can readily absorb into themselves. Both England and France are selective in this manner. Their attitude has even seemed to some to involve a wilful ignorance of many important and interesting things.

**Mrs. F:** Surely you don't suggest that New Zealand preserves its culture in this remarkable manner.

**Dr. F:** No. But physical distance and slender lines of communication act in a selective manner, and permit the formation of a peculiar culture.

#### North Versus South

**Mrs. F:** I find what you say rather absurd. If there were anything in your

view, New Zealanders should become more and more civilised the farther south one goes.

**Dr. F:** And can you doubt that this is actually the case? Life undoubtedly becomes less crass, more steeped in civilised values, the farther south one goes. People have a semblance of an ordered pattern in their lives. They are not so much at the mercy of whatever happens to be new or whatever happens to pay. They have standards, and they judge by them. They have traditions and are influenced by them. Surely these are the marks of a true culture? It is impossible at present to return from the North to the South Island without a deep sense of spiritual relief. But no doubt the war situation also contributes to disturb the judgments and conduct of the North Islanders.

#### "Great Deal of Narrow-Mindedness"

**Mrs. F:** I find what you say rather preposterous. Surely the isolation you extol must help to build up narrow and reactionary attitudes of mind?

**Dr. F:** That, I am afraid, is the other side of the picture. I should be the last to deny it. Undoubtedly the isolation of New Zealand does produce a great deal of narrow-mindedness. Undoubtedly in our various small communities the most fantastic judgments come to prevail, and the most extraordinary valuations come to be put on things and people. There is even a danger that, in abnormal circumstances New Zealand might readily be swept by some wave of mass-hysteria, which only long-term overseas influence would suffice to correct. . . . One of the worst effects of our isolation is its influence on our intellectual leaders. The longer they remain in this country without renewing their contact with overseas springs of thought, the more their ideas become stereotyped and fixed. But the longer they stay here the more dogmatic and oracular they also tend to become, since hardly anyone ventures to contradict them. In the end, they know almost nothing, and are prepared to make pronouncements on practically everything. I hope you don't think that I myself fall entirely into this category. However, if our intellectual leaders are unsatisfactory, our public figures are frequently worse.

**Mrs. F:** You are saying some very unpalatable things. Do you really think New Zealand has nothing original and valuable to offer?

**Dr. F:** I am very far from thinking that. It seems to me that original and valuable things are springing up everywhere in New Zealand. I don't wish to mention names, but I think we may be developing a literature full of the authentic flavour of New Zealand experience. I also think that many of the paintings of the younger New Zealand painters represent a real extension of vision. And I can see no reason why there should not ultimately be an authentic New Zealand contribution in architecture or music or drama or philosophy.

#### The Biggest Obstacle

**Mrs. F:** You don't imagine that the smallness of New Zealand will prevent it from bringing off important political and cultural achievements?

**Dr. F:** I don't for a moment imagine it. Throughout history we have instances

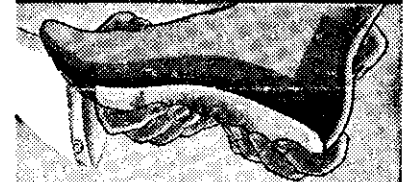
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