

To the Buller and Back

I LEFT the Grey first thing, while a hotful of commercial travellers still lingered yearning over breakfast. The Grey: it was living up to its name. On a wet day it has all the nostalgia of an overlarge goods yard.

Goalposts loomed up through the rain winking on the windscreen.

"Ah," said a knowledgeable man. "Rugby fields, eh?"

"Rugby league," the bus driver put him right, a Greymouth man himself. "On your left, now, that's a flax mill. You can see the flax hanging out to dry."

"To dry!" exclaimed the knowledgeable man, getting his own back.

"That's right, mate," the driver said joyally. "This is the first wet day we've had in weeks. Proper Westport weather, this is."

We swung down to the coast at Rapahoe, with the Strongman mine yawning like a great organised cave in the hillside.

"The coast road proper," the driver said, "begins here." Ahead, beside a prospect of rock and white, lay the road to the Buller.

The bus ran north along a shelf of bluffs and beaches, stopping at times to pay its respects to towns deceased along the way, casualties of the gold era. Towns they remain in name only, because New Zealanders feel there is something vaguely defamatory about the word "village." Between them lies some of the country's finest seaboard, its nikau palms and king-sized ferns fraternising with the Tasman as it rolls in, full flood against the cliffs. Near Mabelle Bay one looks down from the road 450 feet into the sea. Poison Point, they call it (one drop is enough), but I'm not sure that this isn't just a bad joke of the driver's.

At Punakaiki the Blowholes transmit dull thunder with every surge of the sea. If the day is wild, so much the better. Then you can watch the spray lung high into the wind by the sea geysers, and feel the ground shudder under your feet. Here, too, straight out of Ripley, are the Pancakes, great masses of laminated rock petrified from the original griddle.

Over the White Horse Hills we came to Charleston, once a gold town of twenty thousand inhabitants. Its only gold these days is gorse. As things have panned out, most of Charleston has been sluiced away by open-cast coal mining.

"They had 80 pubs here once," the driver said as he brought us up at the solitary remaining one, the tottery corrugated-iron European, round which there lingers even yet an unmistakable recollection of after-the-party. A bright new school looks after the Charleston of tomorrow. But of the good old days nothing is left but a festoon of empties round the European's hospitable door.

North of Charleston, public works were helping the rain make a mess of the road. We had difficulty getting past. Some large men were standing round wringing their hands over a broken-down bulldozer. As we went crawling by, the clouds broke out another shower, and the men scattered for shelter as if sparked by a mention of pick-and-shovel.

Westport is the rough diamond of the Buller. The town consists of a single thoroughfare of hangdog shops, perhaps a mile long, Palmerston Street, in which

by LAWRENCE CONSTABLE

no whistle need ever go unwet. Most of the streets are named after statesmen, few of whom would have been flattered. There is more civic complacency than pride; one senses a local refinement of the national attitude that brooks no criticism. The Westport ego is nourished by a splendid contempt for foreigners. Foreigners are people from any other part of New Zealand, but the most foreign people of all come from Greymouth.

"Oh, no," they corrected me. "We're not part of Westland here. We belong to Nelson." They do, too: the Nelson-Westland Mason-Dixon comes down to the Coast south of Charleston.

But Palmerston Street is not without its renegades. As she brought my lunch, the lady in the Silver Grill dropped the teaspoon.

"Ah," she said, retrieving it and shining it on her apron, "that's a meeting with a young lady for you. Just you take my advice, now, and mind out for yourself round here. The nice ones keep to themselves in Westport."

"Going back to Grey, sport?" said the tobacconist. "Out of the frying-pan, isn't it?" Plainly a foreigner.

Together, the two routes linking Greymouth and Westport frame a capital D, the upright representing the road along the coast, the curve the railway line. The railway strikes inland by the green, devious, treacherously smooth Buller, using the gorge as far as Inangahua. There it deserts the route to Nelson and swings south into a valley that expresses a pioneer remoteness, the more so for the weather breaking over the ranges. Pelts of the original bush are still visible on them, and a wilderness of stumps shows where else it has been.

Two houses at a time are enough to stop the railcar. One such place, Inangahua Landing, was once the "port" of Reefton. Before coach roads were put through, whaleboats struggled upriver to the Landing, where they transhipped

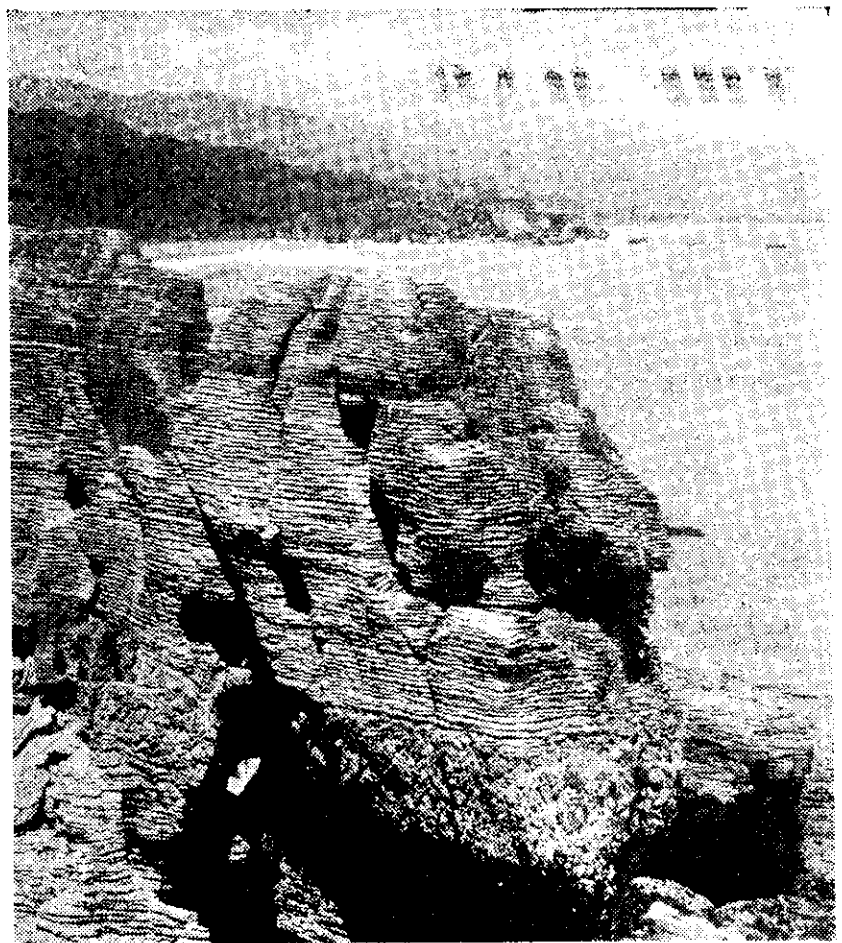
CORRECTION

"DISTINGUISHED COMPANY," a study of Dame Sybil Thorndike and Sir Lewis Casson in last week's issue, was a contributed article by Bruce Mason. It is much regretted that the by-line was inadvertently omitted.

their stores to packhorses for Quartzopolis, as Reefton was known then. Reefton itself, fifteen miles on, is still in the mining business. It is full of the peace of its hills, a modest square-set town, with a main street called Broadway (after old Charlie Broad, who dearly loved a joke).

At Reefton the railcar filled up with youngsters going home from school. The boys were the noisiest; the girls sat eating jellybeans, giggling amongst themselves and scrawling their names in the steam on the windows. A bookworm next to me was wrapped up in "Rockfist Rogan, the Flying Boss of Crossbones Island." I was sorry when he got out; I'd been hoping to learn whether after all these years the *Champion* still retains the services of Fireworks Flynn, the Shake-em-up Sportsmaster.

Soon afterwards the railcar plunged through an interlock of tunnels and



"At Punakaiki are the Pancakes . . . petrified from the original griddle

ranges, to merge at length in the Grey Valley once again. The line runs on through a badlands of dredge tailings, some of it overgrown with bright red moss. Much of the good flood plain of the Grey has disappeared for ever under these tailings. They are the lesions of a gold fever not yet eradicated in Westland. Dredges apart, many a 'Coaster still holds title to some half-forgotten claim, which at weekends he goes out and looks at, with a one-of-these-days light in his eye. Who knows but a few small riches may not have been overlooked in the general unpacking?

Amongst the most fascinating things on the map of New Zealand, or so it seemed to me when I was a regular reader of the *Champion*, are the names of the old mining towns—places like Nightcaps, Blackball, Drybread and Merrijigs—beacons of light in a country too much troubled with industries, exports and the like. Some of the old atlas magic returned to me when I sighted Blackball. There it lay on a western terrace of the valley, half enveloped by bush, shelved, as it were, between hills and river; so I must go and haunt the geography lessons of my past.

I left the railcar to go up to Blackball in the bus. It proved to be an untidy L-shaped town with mullock on the outskirts and bracken-bordered streets. There isn't much of it, so they've spread it out. The buildings of the state mine are camped out of sight in a hollow; but its presence is implicit in row upon row of discoloured cottages, their yards full of disrepair, palings falling off the fence and gorse at the gate. Small dumps of coal lay about in the streets and gardens. Some miners were going home with towels about their necks, young

fellows of hardly more than sixteen, streaks of black still showing in their hair, and hunched oldsters in peaked caps. They carried haversacks and lunchboxes and heavy objects in sacks, and uttered g'day at me like a password, which it was.

Dodging a shower, I sheltered with one of them in a shop doorway (Monster Foot Ware Sale, all this week). His face shone pink from the bath-house, but there were moons of coal-grime under his fingernails.

"One thing about the Coast," he told me cheerfully, resting his sack. "You don't go short o' fuel. Plenty o' coal and wood." It would have been tactless to point out that they had the climate for it.

But Blackball was on terms with the past all right, if not the particular past I had been thinking of. It went uncomfortably further back than the atlas or the *Champion*. There on the verge of the home-grown bush, it put me in mind of a time I was barely old enough to know, the age of the soup-kitchen at the turn of the thirties.

It was almost dark when I got back to the hotel in Greymouth. At table the commercial travellers were talking merchandise and calling for returns of steamed pudding. Hul-lo, they said, where had I been at lunch? Westport. I told them; and when they believed me, they went on to suggest other felicities for the morrow—Kumara, Hokitika, the Liverpool State Mine, the brickworks. It was nice to see them enjoying themselves. You can do a lot worse with a wet day in Greymouth (or a fine one, if you're lucky enough) than joyride with it to the Buller and back.