

THE ROAD BACK

I HAVE never been sure whether a wise man indulges his homesickness or controls it. After periodic attacks through 60 years I am satisfied that he can't eradicate it, but in what spirit should he meet it when it comes?

When I was young it was just a terrifying experience like toothache—something that I could neither conquer nor endure. Anything

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could start it: a letter, a smell, a dusty road, a hymn at church, a button on my coat or a patch on my trousers. One of the worst attacks I ever suffered was brought on by a swarm of bees, which I had seen leave home the day before, and this morning, as I returned to school from holidays, saw hanging on what we used to call a titri bush, a few miles on my way. To this day I can remember the spot, the morning, and the weather, and last week, when I drove past it again, I thought I could identify the bush as well. It is, of course, not possible that titri (*Olearia lineata*) would stand unchanged for 60 years; but I am still persuaded that what I saw was a descendant of that bush growing on the same bank and within a foot or two of the same spot.

I know, too, that it was the pull of that valley and that bush, of those bees, and the still dusty winding road that filled my petrol tank and steered my wheel. For I am now free to go when the past cries come. It is not running away from my duty but running to it—an act of filial devotion for which I am openly praised. But if those who praise the old man had known the boy; if his father and mother had known that what he was at twelve he would still be on the eve of 72, I wonder if they would have driven him as firmly to school.

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turn, gradually I began to recognise amongst them the faces of people I knew. When the cup is empty, Mrs. McCallum lowers it into the water for the lucky nearest to clean. I used to do the same myself with the cake-mixing basins.

The Eels, the Springs and the Beach, these are the attractions Takaka urges you to see. It is only the feeling of the place that a traveller can add. Locals don't do that: it is too much a part of them. Only a narrow strip of dust and shingle binds this place to the rest of New Zealand: that is what alters the temper of its living.

You feel it most strongly when night comes down. Then when the moths close in and caper at Takaka's lonely nucleus of power from the Cobb, every house and every room becomes an island of its own invention. Your mind or your fingers or your mere contentedness with nothing to do must satisfy the evening for you. There is no cheating at the pictures, except on Friday or Saturday. Along the hypotenuse of main street the only sound is the occasional whirr of a milk shake being mixed. Belong there and you may have band practice, crochet or the prospect of milking in the morning. Otherwise you may take a walk (multiples of three miles), rounded out with beer, bath, book and bed. Somehow you have become exempt from the cares the world has on the other side of the Hill.

And I wonder what he himself should think when he looks back on it all; whether he should blush at his own weakness or rejoice that "nature still remembers what was so fugitive."

THE two cabbage-trees outside my window carry six or seven nests each, filled almost continuously throughout the summer by growing families of sparrows. Many of the fledglings are taken by my cat, which I don't feel justified in restraining even when I see her returning for a second and third victim, and many more perish when the nests

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are blown down by the wind. But the number of survivors must still approach a hundred. Under the iron roof a few feet away starlings make one nest and sometimes two, but never more than two. I am not sure in their case whether it is the same birds that make the second nest or a new pair, but with them everything is over before New Year. Yesterday morning, however, when I found a further nest blown down, and looked inside, I discovered four sparrow fledglings and two starlings, the young starlings and two of the sparrows still alive. As the sparrow's nests are all several feet above the roof, I have to suppose that a starling for some reason laid two eggs in a sparrow's nest and then either died or forgot them; but the result was something I have never seen before. Though the young starlings were bigger than the sparrows (living and dead), they were at the same stage of development.

THE trick played on Nature by that starling was a little more successful than an attempted trick staged recently by a Sailing Club at Stewart's Gully. To raise funds at its annual gala the Club persuaded one of its supporters (for a consideration) to sit for three weeks in a tree with four hen eggs under his waistband. But no chickens appeared. As our grandmothers all knew, there is more in hatching

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eggs than merely keeping them warm, and I suppose this man knew it, too; but taking the other precautions is not so easy when your nest is 30 feet up a

pine tree. I am glad to know that he kept his bonus warm—£100 for making a laughing stock of himself for 21 days.

But he was unfortunate in his time and place. The most famous egg hatcher in history seems to have been St. Kevin, but he chose Ireland and the Dark Ages for his demonstration, and a blackbird instead of a hen as the supplier of the eggs. The hatching seems, in fact, to have been done by the bird, the saint merely providing a resting place in the hollow of his hand. But I don't think saints have ever been numerous on the banks of the Waimakariri.

Here is the story as translated from the Latin by Helen Waddell:

At one Lenten season, St. Kevin, as was his way, fled from the company of men to a certain solitude, and in a little hut that did but keep out the sun and the rain, gave himself earnestly to reading and to prayer, and his leisure to contemplation alone. And as he knelt in his accustomed fashion, with his hand outstretched through the window and lifted up to heaven, a blackbird settled on it, and busying herself as in her nest, laid in it an egg. And so moved was the saint that in all patience and gentleness he remained, neither closing nor withdrawing his hand; but until the young ones were fully hatched he held it out unwearied, shaping it for the purpose. And for a sign of perpetual remembrance of this thing, all the images of St. Kevin throughout Ireland show a blackbird in his outstretched hand.

IN case I have readers who think I am not sympathetic to saints I had better say at once that I have a grandson of seven who carries that saint's name. Whether he is sympathetic to grandfathers or not I leave others to say, but I suspect

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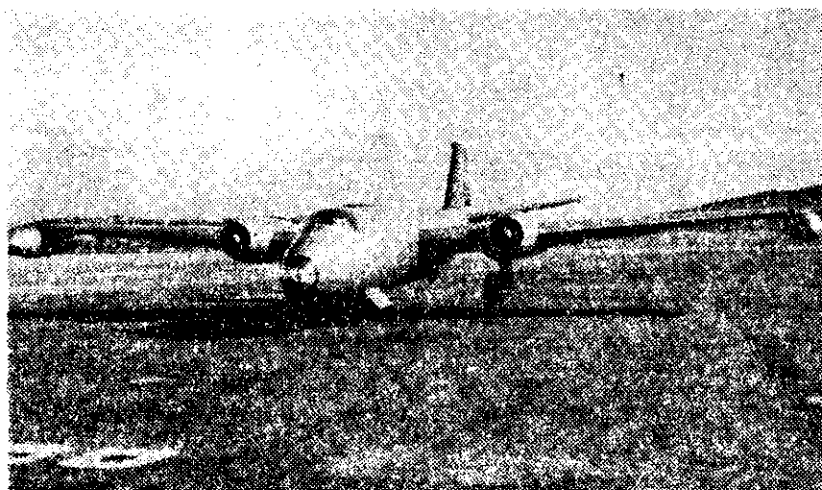
after something that happened today that he is less than sure of their omniscience.

Dick was up an elm tree with a saw cutting away branches that were growing too near the power lines. I was giving moral support from the ground. Kevin was standing beside me but with increasing uneasiness. The branches, he said, would hit the lines and "bring the electricity down on us." I assured him that they would fall clear, and for a moment or two longer he stood his ground. Then he lost confidence.

"You could be wrong, grandad," he said, and broke away, as a limb came down and missed the line by inches.

I suppose St. Kevin had a grandfather, but I am not deep enough in hagiology to know what his grandson thought of him.

(To be continued)



AIR FORCE DAY—Saturday, February 19—will be marked by a special NZBS programme, recorded at Ohakea, and broadcast by all YA and YZ stations at 9.30 p.m. The photograph shows a Canberra jet bomber, one of two R.A.A.F. aircraft which will visit Ohakea for the day. The other will be a Neptune reconnaissance and anti-submarine aircraft

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