

Novelist At Work

ALL authors are cannibals. They have to eat their friends and their enemies, their relatives and their compatriots. And because it is the unusual people, the energetic people, even the unlikeable people that are very often the most interesting, these are the sort of people an author must put into his books.

This general point was made by the New Zealand novelist John Brodie (who has written "The Seekers" and other books under the pen-name "John Guthrie"). "Because of this," he said, "the public should not expect their authors to paint New Zealand and New Zealanders in the constantly rosy light of a travel brochure." Merely that an author implied a criticism of some aspect of his country was no reason to class him as a subversive, he said. On a personal level friends of an author would often say, "Oh, you shouldn't have described poor old so-and-so in that way. You've hurt his feelings."

"Actually, it is not often that an author sets out to portray a real person," said Mr. Brodie. "Usually it is just past observations coming to the surface of the conscious mind with little or no recollection of their source. And anyway," he added, "I think I'd be rather pleased to appear in a book—even as a bad character."

"The sort of thing to boast about at parties," suggested *The Listener* representative. Mr. Brodie grinned and nodded, but it could easily be seen that he is a very sincere person, not liking to hurt people's feelings or give offence even unintentionally.

Asked about the differences between writing in London and writing here, Mr. Brodie said that the novelist writing in London knew that if his book were published at all, it would appear along with 30,000 others in the same year, and this apart from the thousands which would never get as far as the printing presses. Hence the author knew he was in the middle of intense literary activity and would need all his talent and experience and capacity for work if he wanted to get anywhere.

"It is said that in London a novelist needs to have at least seven novels published before he can really consider himself on the literary map," explained Mr. Brodie. "A new novel is very lucky to get a review at all, even a bad one."

In New Zealand when he left before the war, he said, there was little publishing of novels and a not much better magazine market for short stories. Writing without being published was as unsatisfactory as acting in front of a mirror with only yourself as audience, and the New Zealand author of 25 years ago felt he was working in a vacuum. He had nothing to kick against, none of the friction of competition with other writers which was vital to a novelist. "On the other hand," Mr. Brodie added, "that is not to say that all novelists ought to live in attics."

The situation here appeared considerably better now, he said. More work was being published locally, but he felt that the growth of more regional writing,



JOHN BRODIE
"First take a general theme"

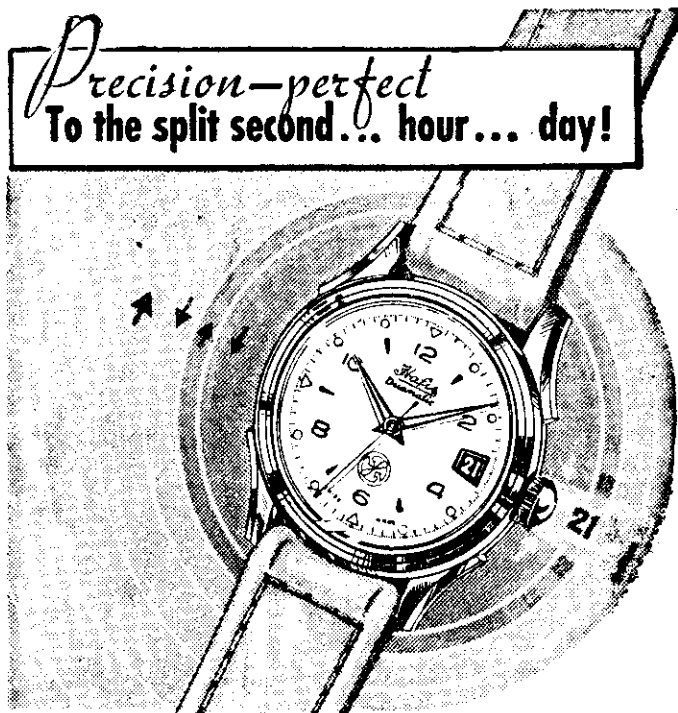
even in a small country like New Zealand, would be very valuable. A certain amount of this was already present in the publications, for instance, of the Pegasus and Caxton Presses in Christchurch. But there was plenty of material for much more, both historical and creative. This need not be done by professional or even semi-professional writers. "After all," he said, "even Shakespeare had to stand on the shoulders of a lot of small people."

And if, as some allege, the New Zealand public has an initial distrust of home-grown novels unless they have already been praised overseas, the only way to overcome this, he said, was for authors to keep on turning out good stuff.

Mr. Brodie offered *The Listener* representative a cigarette, seemed mildly surprised when told that 11.0 a.m. was too early for the reporter to be smoking, and went on to discuss in a quiet way his method of writing. He said he starts with a general theme, for instance, the nostalgia of his *Paradise Bay*. Thinking round this central theme he mentally selects a scene for the novel with one or two characters as well. All this together suggests the rough outline of the plot. With this in mind, Mr. Brodie divides the book into three main divisions, the last being the climax. This he breaks down into maybe six subdivisions, then 12, and so on, till he has reached the required number of chapter headings. With an eye on these he begins writing, new ideas being suggested as he works. He writes in longhand at the rate of about 1000 words a day.

And what chances are there for a New Zealander going to London these days? "The chances are still there," said Mr. Brodie, "and especially if he has experience in radio and television script writing. But any New Zealander going will need four things: some capital to start, a job to go to, ability to work and, most important, talent. "That one per cent inspiration is just as necessary as the 99 per cent perspiration. Hard work alone won't get you everywhere."

If he has all this, maybe the hopeful novelist going to London will some day be honoured with the second cocktail party given by the publishing firm, Nelson and Co., in the course of their history. The first went to Mr. Brodie when they published his *The Little Country*. It was the first in 142 years, and they have not given another since.



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