

(continued from previous page)

there for a few days, then walk back. The visit of one poet to the station was an eventful one. The crashings of rocks from the top of 8000 ft. Mount Burnett throughout the night gave alarm to musterers camped at the foot of the mountain. Dawn found the musterers scrambling up the mountain to see if an earthquake had rent it asunder. Near the top of the mountain they found a poet visitor in a state of near collapse.

He confided in them: "Unknown to anyone. I decided to keep an all-night vigil on top of this mountain. All went well till midnight, when I began to hear strange noises. Peering over the precipice, I saw dozens of witches climbing up the cliffs to get me. I could only keep them away by pushing rocks down on them—all night long, until daylight. Then they disappeared."

The Boar Slayer

So the stories of poets and poetry have been woven into the fabric of Mackenzie Country folk lore, and the memory of bards like Archie McPhee, "The Boar Slayer of the Mackenzie," lingers on. Archie boasted that he and work could not agree, but when he asked John Rutherford, the owner of Opawa station for a job, Rutherford replied: "It would be a poor station that couldn't find a job for you, Archie."

He worked for a while, collected his cheque, then made for the hotel where he was assured of a crowded bar eager to listen to his tales of imagination and might that make the printed version of "New Zealand best stories" seem tame affairs. Still growing on the banks of Mackintosh's Creek is the tree he planted as a thanksgiving for his deliverance from the banshees there.

These reckless souls, the roving breed, the rowdy, and the rest,

Have hit the trail north, south, and east; but most have journeyed West.

Not all, however, of these poets "have journeyed West." One of the most noted of the ballad makers is Ernie Slow. Now in his seventies, Ernie has spent a lifetime in the Mackenzie Country—rabbiting, fencing, shearing, shepherding—anything that comes along. Ernie has never written down any of the many

Radio Opera

LA TRAVIATA

"ONCE more frantic crowds struggled in the lobbies of the theatre; once more dresses were torn and hats crushed; once more a mania possessed the public." The scene was Her Majesty's Theatre, London, and the crowds who besieged the theatre were hastening to see a new opera by Verdi called *La Traviata* ("The Strayed One") and reputed to be so immoral that its performance was a public disgrace. The London reception was in striking contrast to its first performance in Venice, where, for a variety of reasons, things went wrong and the evening culminated in disaster. The composer had had great difficulty in finding suitable singers, and was obliged to employ a singer for the part of Violetta, who had a good voice but was excessively fat. When in the last act the Doctor announced that she had only a few hours to live the house went into gales of laughter. But the debacle had begun before that, and this incident provoked the audience to an uproar. Verdi, bewildered by the reception, wrote dispirited letters to his

friends, debated with himself whether the fault was his own or the singer's, and concluded that time alone would decide. The opera was withdrawn and he returned home. Later, when the appropriate changes were made, it was staged in other Italian cities and to great acclaim moved across Europe to London.

La Traviata has been chosen to start a new series of opera presentations specially devised for radio, and will be presented in a live broadcast from all YCs on Thursday, October 18, at 8.15 p.m.

"We are not trying to compete with LP's and their casts of famous singers," said James Robertson, "but we want to produce opera as a radio entertainment. We're using a narrator and off-stage sounds and even if this proves some-



what irritating I don't believe in listening to opera as a piece of music. We have chosen the right New Zealand singers and will be starting the series with this very popular singers' opera. We'll be following it with complete productions of Puccini's *Il Tabarro* and Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*. David Sell will be getting a small chorus together for these two operas. The National Orchestra will provide the music, and we have as well the co-operation of the Productions Department and the Commercial Division."

Verdi's inspiration for the opera came from the play *Camille*, which in its turn was adapted from the book *La Dame aux Camélias*, by Dumas. The heroine of the play and the opera, Violetta Valéry, was a real person, the most famous Parisian courtesan of her epoch. "She is psychologically the most intriguing and the most baffling creature of her type that the modern world has known," writes Ernest Newman.

La Traviata is pre-eminently a prima-donna's opera, and many great opera singers have excelled in it. Violetta has been played by Adelina Patti, Melba, Tetrassini and Galli-Curci.

In this production Violetta will be sung by Sybil Phillipps, Annina by Alice Graham, Alfredo by Robin Gordon, Giorgio by Donald Munro, and Dr. Grenvil by Martin Wilson. The performance will be repeated later in *ZB Sunday Showcase*.



SYBIL PHILLIPPS



ALICE GRAHAM

poems he has composed, but, given the right environment, he can recite poem after poem. Every shepherd in the Mac-

kenzie Country knows "The Devil's Daughter," and in his little hut, one sunny afternoon with the temperature

registering 93 degrees, Ernie recited it to me.

The Sardine Hut

The scene of the ballad takes place in the Sardine Hut, six feet by six feet, with a five-foot high lean-to roof. Situated near the Fork River, it was a boundary-keeper's hut in the early days, and was so named because of its inability to accommodate all the musterers expected to stay there.

This corrugated-iron hut had a corrugated-iron door that moved with the wind. When a strong nor'-wester blew up, the wire handle of the door rubbed against the iron, making a screeching noise. Newcomers who did not know about this (and they were never told) were mystified by the eerie noise, so that the hut gained its reputation of being haunted.

The appearance here (on page 8) of Ernie Slow's ballad is, I believe, its first publication.

LEFT: The Jollie Valley (behind ridge in left background) where whisky called up the Devil's Daughter, according to the ballad

