

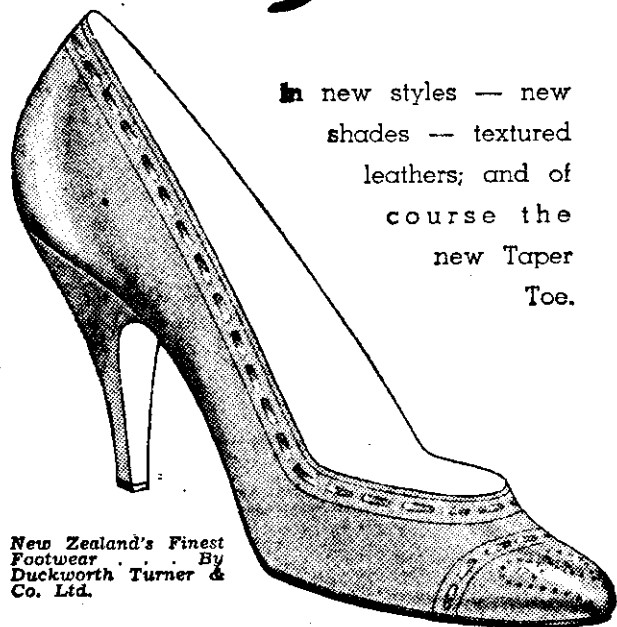
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Auckland Letter

DOWN WITH NATURE!

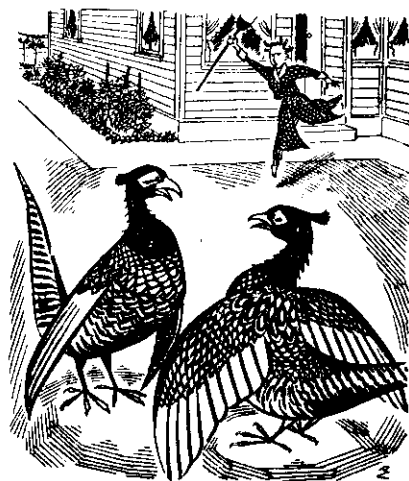
By SARAH CAMPION

AUCKLAND is often called the Queen City—for no very apparent reason, as Oliver Duff remarks in *New Zealand Now*. The brochures printed to snare the tourist eye, the little gift-books designed for sending Home at Yuletide, all present lyrical vistas of this seagirt city. Rangitoto raises its triple cones ad nauseam, the panorama from Mount Eden is described with salesman's eloquence, let the maimed syntax fall where it may like chips at an axeman's carnival: even an early enthusiast writes "The scenery from the town" (nota bene, *from the town*) is rendered beautiful, not merely by the relief of water and shipping, but also from the islands and volcanic pyramids which everywhere meet the eye." And so on, up to 1957, everyone standing rapturously on volcanic cones and carefully turning their backs on metropolitan royalty. For here, as so often, every prospect pleases and only man is vile. Architecturally, let's face it, the Queen City is a regular dog's dinner.

For it's only the climate which makes suburban Auckland any better than Tooting or Hendon. Only the happy climate, which encourages greenery to hide many a mean horror. Unfortunately, the owners of the worst examples are those most ferocious in ousting Nature wherever they can: they'd rather display their souls' sores by cutting down bush, ruthlessly shaving grass and having as garden, a few cruelly staked gladioli among rocks, or trunks of destroyed trees, painted red-white-and-blue to teach them manners. I am not one for ivied ruins, but do prefer those inglorious structures where passion fruit riots over the washhouse, or bougainvillea hides the I-beg-your-pardon. This at least is better than the artful plaster gnome, in crimson and beige, spotlighting the vent of the septic tank as he sits grinningly astride it.

My point, thus champingly reached, is this: In Auckland, as everywhere else, you come a cropper when, in any of your works, you ignore what Nature has put there ahead of you. Tear down what you must, when you must; but placate the goddess (or hag) by letting her come back on her own terms somewhere. Hell has no fury like a woman scorned: and this woman will boomerang more inconveniently than any other. The architectural ruin of Auckland was, in my opinion, due to man's notorious arrogance on this point. Partly owing to hurry, more to greed, the direct descendants of the pioneers built badly; and ever since, through lack of imagination, through tight-mindedness rather than bloody-mindedness, their successors have carried on the botching. Thus we get the mean, yet extravagantly gew-gawed house—the house with montrously hanging eaves (to keep off the Auckland avalanches, perhaps?)—the house with brooding Swiss chalet eyebrows that have wooden teardrops falling stiff and useless from them—the house with leaded windows whose purpose is further stultified by permanently half-drawn chocolate-coloured blinds, a swing for baby flies dropping plumb from the centre of each. And many more. It is as if their prideful dwellers would shut out the wilderness of the natural at all costs. Pioneers respected and came to terms with the natural, even while they destroyed it for their human purposes: the sons and grandsons deny it, denying life in one mad sweep as well.

For one thing, as Plischke points out in his *Design and Living*, the early buildings were planned for the climate. "To us today the attitude of mind in which these houses and all the things in them were created is of special interest. The big glass door-windows open the rooms towards the gardens and towards the landscape; they admit light and air in a way that you rarely find in the houses of the later generations." But for many years since the cry has been: Down with all that! *A bas la Nature!* (perfidious, like Albion); let's have no nonsense about grace, or surroundings. Let's have stucco frontages and false flat roofs on hovel-garages (see Plischke, page 35): let's have dollops of



"They make such a noise in the early morning"

broderie anglaise in wood, hellish for the handy-man owner to paint every five years, over our sharp-eaved villas: let's face the villas southwards, with the front door opening opposite the back, a gully of draught between, so that when you open the one you are blown out through the other: let's try every style known to Europe without once acknowledging that here is Europe's antipodes, without ever accepting the nature of the land we build on. Let's have banks like chateaux of the Loire, cinemas modelled on the dwellings of 17th century Spanish grandees, milk bars in the style of Tudor manors. Let's have all and everything except houses built for comfortable living in a comfortable climate among beautiful views.

Now all these thoughts have churned in my mind since an overheard conversation in a bus. A bus plying to Queen Street from a neat suburb not 12 minutes' run away, and in front of me two well-dressed, well-fed, yet troubled matrons. Troubled not by ill health, bereavement, or erring children, but by cock pheasants on their lawns.

"Such a nuisance!" moaned one, "they do make such a noise in the early morning, don't they?"

"Cheeky, too," said the second. "After all the lettuce, and coming right to the back door—imagine, there in the yard, as bold as brass!"

"It's that bit of bush against our fence," said the first, crisply. "Nothing's ever done about it. Someone ought to cut it down."

And, if Auckland history runs true to form, someone soon will.

N.Z. LISTENER, JULY 26, 1957.

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