



SHEPHERD'S CALENDAR

The Vanishing Frontier

IF I were a dictator, which I thank God I will never be, I would give farmers five years in which to stop the advance of gorse. If they did nothing in that time control would be taken out of their hands. If in the next five years the others had shown substantial progress I would give them a chance to complete the job with assistance from the public purse. At that stage it would pay the State to assume half the load. The drifters, loafers, and poverty-paralysed non-starters would have their land cleared by some public authority and the cost recovered by such instalments as the land could carry. Then someone would shoot me to encourage my successor to clean the slate.

SEPTEMBER 30

He probably would clean it and say something at the same time about liberty and democracy. But he would not clean the land. He would just bring the day nearer when no single farmer would have a chance against gorse on anything but arable acres. Perhaps the day has come already. Canterbury is the easiest province in New Zealand to keep clean, but drive in any direction now to the main mountain range or spend a day almost anywhere on the fringe of hills by the sea and ask yourself what the position will be in another 25 years if gorse maintains its present rate of progress.

If I owned one half, one quarter, one tenth of the land I have seen invaded by gorse from my own hilltop in 25 years I could afford to buy Otahuna for the Boy Scouts. But no one is losing sleep brooding over the situation. We

gave up grubbing because, we told ourselves, the chemist would now do the job. We gave up spraying by hand because, we said, the spray could be applied better by tractor. We gave up using our tractors because chemicals, we argued, could be applied more cheaply by planes. We are turning away from planes because the most efficient distributors, we say now, are helicopters. And during all those waits the gorse is growing as fast as our folly and stronger than our characters and convictions. We have neither the stomach nor the means now to keep the battle going, and we face disaster if we stop. The dictator may be nearer than we realise.

I WAS pleased when a girl who called recently to show us her pony took most pride in its flowing tail. It was an impressive tail, not quite touching the ground, but ending gracefully between hocks and fetlocks. In the war against the summer flies the only unprotected areas will be from the withers forward; and those will be defended from the forward end.

But I will be surprised if that pony, which is destined now for the Summer Show, appears with its tail intact. Though docking is losing favour it is not yet, as far as I know, an offence in law; and this pony was a cob. It had the short back and the round rump that fashion says must end in a bang—a tail that is not a tail, but a stump with a few bristles on it, all ending at the same point. I am sorry for that girl. If she ignores the fashion the judges will laugh at her. If she conforms, and wins,

LAKE SUMNER: "The countryside is being destroyed to enable more and more people to enjoy it"

she will ride home weeping. She should, of course, stay away altogether, as she will when she is older; but she is still a child, and if shows are not for children, however young or old they may be, it is difficult to understand some of their rules. That is one reason why I seldom miss them.

Oddly enough the day that pony arrived I had been reading a book written 200 years earlier in which the docking of tails was explained and justified. The purpose, the author said, was not to make the horse look smart, but to make it less likely that "the horse going before would strike the next in the eyes with his dirty and muddy tail." That is a kind explanation, but not, I think, a sound one. Although roads 200 years ago were quagmires for months on end, and horses were commonly driven tandem, an animal following close enough to have a tail swished in his face would be too close to the other horse's heels. After all, horses' tails don't swing backwards. I think "bob-tailing" was done to save the groom's face afterwards, as farmers when I was a boy tied up the tails of draught horses in winter whether they had been docked or not; an art in which they took great pride and developed considerable skill. But I never heard them say or suggest that they were protecting other horses.

I AM not joining in the scramble for a section at Lake Sumner, or aiding and abetting those who are agitating for a new road. The more noise they make the more I think of a remark made some time ago by J. B. Priestley that everywhere in the world today, but most painfully in the older parts of it, the countryside is being destroyed to enable more and more people to enjoy it. It is true that most of us when we say bright things are more interested in the fact that we have been clever than in the situation we have been describing, and I should not like to swear that Priestley's love of the countryside is greater than his love of smart words. But that remark was more than smart. It was an accurate description of a situation that I find deeply disturbing, since there is no remedy for it and no escape from it.

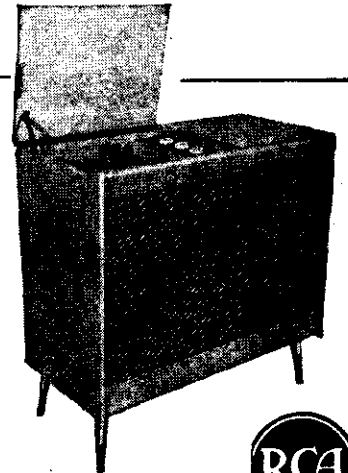
Even in New Zealand, a country just emerging from the wilderness, it is already difficult to find a retreat that a hundred others have not found, too, and that a thousand will not have found in another year or two and occupied with litter and noise.

It must be 30 or 40 years since Arnold Wall told me of an incident in his tramping experiences that depressed him when it happened and still depresses me when I recall it. He was alone on a remote ridge on which he was sure no white man had ever stood before, and sat down to rest and meditate. But when he decided to move on again and put a hand on the ground for support as he rose, his fingers closed on a withered belt with a buckle on it that some earlier tramp had dropped years ahead of him. There may still be paths, as Job said, which no fowl knows and the vulture's eye has not seen; which the lion's whelps have not trodden nor the fierce lion passed by. But they are harder and harder to find. Job, whoever he was, has been dead two or three thousand years, and if he returned to the land of Uz today he would probably be reported from an aeroplane.

(To be continued)

HIGH FIDELITY

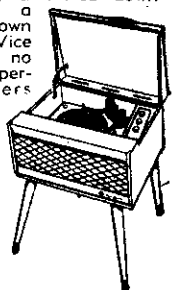
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fuss or
fiddling



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