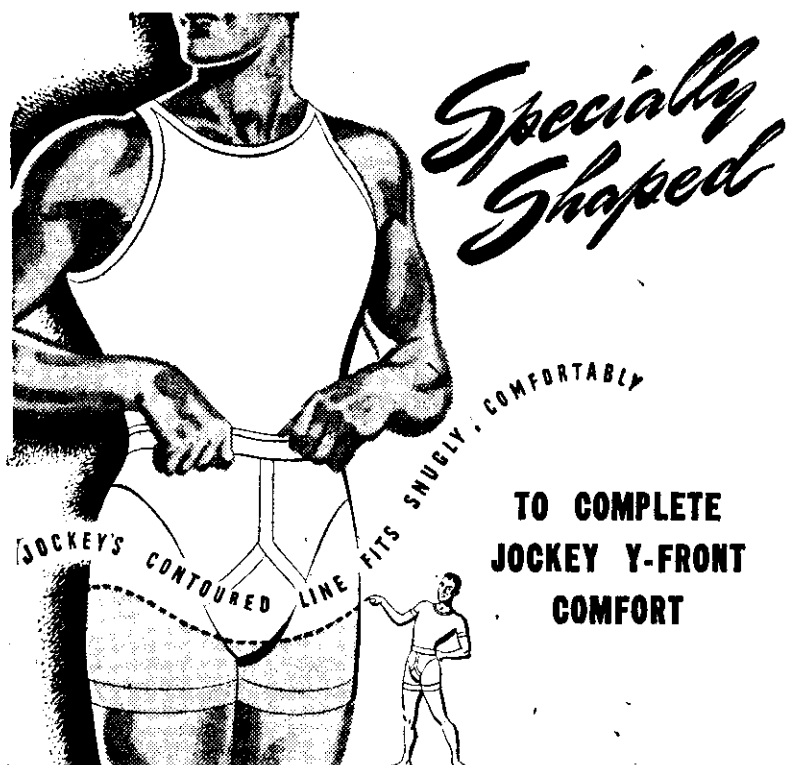




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High Country Sheepfarmer

TWENTY-FOUR years ago I stood on one of the northern buttresses of Mount Torlesse, looking up the gorge of the Waimakariri into the wider valleys of the upper basin. In the centre, lay a rather drab jumble of tussock hills; but on each side and behind rose tier upon tier of ranges, seemingly endless, their shoulders rising from the dim shadowy valleys and their heads white with snow.

I asked my companion what country this was, who lived there and what they did. Even today I don't need the photograph I took then to bring the picture to my mind; even today I can feel the eager curiosity and the excitement those peaks and hidden valleys roused in me. No ordinary life could be lived in such surroundings and surely, no ordinary men would be found there. I have since come to know that scene very well indeed, for my home has been in the upper gorge for nearly twenty years. Curiously enough, not one of those youthful sentiments, which passed through my mind so long ago, has become tarnished with the years. The ranges and the river valleys are still places of mysterious attraction; the life is still tinged with the romantic glamour of the open spaces, and the men are just a little more than life size.

THIS station where we live covers about 63,000 acres of mountain country, ranging from rideable tussock hills to the jagged tops of mountains over 6,000 feet high. On this area we carry about 10,000 fine-half-bred sheep, an average of not more than one sheep to every five acres. People sometimes say to me, "Of course, sheep never go up there, do they?" Indeed they go up there, and if there was anything higher to go up they would go up that, too. There's no top too high, no bluff too steep, no gorge too deep, for the wandering sheep to poke into, looking for a tasty bite. A farmer from the plains once said to me, "What do you chaps do all the year? You don't have to do a lot of cultivation and sow crops, you don't have fat lambs to look after, and you don't have any harvesting—what do you do with your time?"

I said, "How long does it take you to run your sheep into the shed to get them shorn?" "Oh," he said, "we can round them all up in half a day, I suppose." "Well," I said, "it takes us three weeks, not allowing for wet weather, and we have to do it four times in six months." We seem to spend our whole time in the short mountain summer mustering sheep in, and turning them out again; the unfortunate creatures seem to be everlastingly wanted for something. Tailing, shearing, dipping and weaning; and finally the autumn muster. It must be a weary life for them, and occasionally we feel it's a weary life for us; but it's very fascinating all the same. Getting out of a warm bed at half-past two in the morning, and eating tough chops by candlelight when you're not hungry, may sound an unromantic sort of occupation, but I defy anyone to say he feels no excitement, no anticipation, when he steps outside the

"The High Country has two kinds of inhabitant, men and dogs," says DAVID McLEOD, "and I often wonder which is the more important." Of the "Men at Work" talks recently broadcast by 3YA none was more successful—and certainly none was more typical of New Zealand—than David McLeod's contribution, "High Country Sheepfarmer," which is reprinted here. A second edition of it is to be heard soon by overseas listeners to Radio New Zealand.

but as the first hint of daylight is picking out the outlines of the hills, and sees the stars dimming as the light grows stronger; hears the tumble of the mountain stream where he washes his face, and the little sigh of wind in the birch trees.

AS men get older they tend to leave the real high country and go to places where they can do their mustering on a horse—"pigskin country" as they call it. I suppose that's natural, but it's not the same—nothing can really compare with the walk up the creek in the dawn—four or five men in single file with twenty or thirty dogs scrambling over the rocks all round them—the pull out on to a spur just when the sun strikes the pale grey shingle-top and turns it to the colour of angels' wings, the first smoke, when the men sit on a rock before they separate on to their beats and the dour early morning silence is relaxed.

If you are lucky and have the top beat, you climb on to the very top, happy in the knowledge that your hardest work will have been done in the cool of early morning and you can stride along in the high thin air and see, perhaps half Canterbury, spread beneath your feet. It's a glorious picture, isn't it? I'm just waiting to hear somebody say, "How about the stormy days?—the bitter searching winds, the driving sleet, and the long tramps through snow in the autumn muster?" Yes, that's true; often it's hard, often it's bitterly cold, and always a man must go on, because he's one of a team. I could tell you a story of a blizzard, when the men came down the last spur holding each other's sticks, because that was the only way they could keep together; even then the leader would have lost his way but for a dog.

THAT'S another thing about the High Country. It has two kinds of inhabitant, men and dogs; and I often wonder which is the more important. Certainly one can't do without the other. We have to have so many dogs, five or six each, and their family trees and characteristics are the subject of endless gossip. Talk about a mothers' meeting! See a row of shepherds sitting on the sheepyard rails on a summer's evening when the sheep are safely in the shed. Hear the pedigree of the latest pup and the wonderful run he did on the blind spur that morning—and the hats are pushed on to the backs of the heads and someone says, "Well, he was out of Ferguson's Lass, and she was by Jack Hart's Corby, and that breed always started young—I remember a pup I had..." And so the tale goes on and the dogs sit round