



John Pascoe, Dept. of Internal Affairs
 "THE unfortunate creatures seem to be everlastingly wanted for something"—
 David McLeod at work among his sheep.

just like their masters, tired, quarrelsome, humorous or sedate, according to their characters.

Of course, it isn't all mustering—even in the "season," which lasts from about November 20 to the end of May. If there's wet weather at shearing-time there may be leisure for all hands until the sheep are dry again. There's so much extra work and long hours in the High Country, that we don't expect the men to do much when a slack day comes.

SHEARING time is always interesting in spite of the hard work. Wool is a fascinating product, and everyone likes to see the bins fill up with fine white fleeces; and we all pull a few locks out of the top line and hold them up and admire the fine crimp and the long staple; and talk learnedly of 58's and 64's—and hope the classer won't overhear and tell us it's only 56's. Those are the figures by which the fineness of the fibre is measured, and it takes a practised eye to recognise them. If we have a good gang of shearers—eight or ten men is the usual—they may turn out over 1,000 sheep in a day. If the weather's fine and they go on doing that for a week, then things get really hectic. The musterers have to try, not only to muster enough sheep to keep the shearers going, but they must also try to get them turned out again, for there's little feed round the homestead paddocks for five or six thousand sheep. The pressers must press wool for their lives, and the bales must be carted away almost every day. As for the boss; well, he must be out with the musterers a good deal of the time; available at the shed whenever he's wanted; superintend the branding; draft the incoming mobs; and most

vital of all—keep the cook in a good humour. There we go again—I could talk for an hour on station cooks and never tell half I know.

NOT all the hard work is done during the season. When the seasonal musterers have left, the winter sets in with its short days and heavy frosts, often running down to 30 degrees for days on end. Then we begin to think about snow—the bugbear that always menaces the High Country. When the air gets still and cold and the sky is leaden and yellowish, the old hands look round and talk about 1918 and 1939, and even recall the almost mythical stories of the '95 snow, when a well-known station lost all but a few hundred of its 23,000 sheep. If snow comes early in the winter it may lie a long time; the short days and the low sun too weak to clear it, even off the sunny faces. Then the men must get out and find the mobs of sheep huddled on the ridges where the snow is thin, or worse still, buried in drifts where it has been driven by the wind. Hours must be spent tramping a track, and then the string of sheep must be persuaded to follow it down. It's always astonishing to me to see some great rangy wether, slabsided with hunger, but game and determined, struggle through to the man-made track, and plunge off down the hill piloting his companions to safety.

The snow's bad enough, but that's not all we have to worry about. Snowed-in sheep are a perfect target for the kea, and often we come across a litter of torn bodies and crimson bloodstains on the snow, or a single sheep with the tell-tale mark upon his back. Then the cold night vigil is added to the labour of the day time. The real killer is

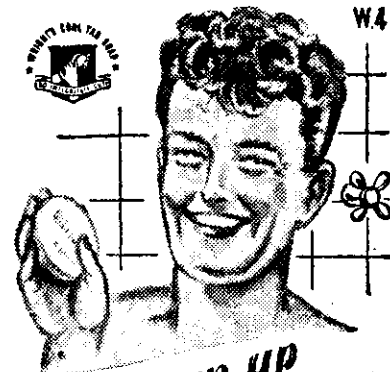
elusive, and the chance to catch him comes very rarely. Funnily enough, in spite of our constant war with the kea the high country men have very little bitterness against him. We like the gay comedian, and the fight is typical of the rather primitive struggle of high country life. He lurks above us in the rocks, swooping down upon his scarlet wings and screaming his eldritch cry, and we hunt him how and when we can, with stick and gun and trap, and with the lure of a captured call-bird. I knew an old man who turned from mustering to kea hunting for a living. He used to go out for days at a time with a loaf of bread and a pound of butter, his billy, and an old raincoat for cover. He boiled his tea and pieces of kea in the same billy, and spent the nights sitting by a fire on some far cold spur, his old shotgun across his knees. One night he was caught out on the hill in an earthquake. The mountain shook, the trees thrashed in the air, and great boulders jerked from their seats and went hurtling down, bounding from ledge to ledge and crashing through the bush. The old man plunged downhill in the darkness, dropping his gun in his panic, and only by some miracle managed to reach the flat.

THE High Country has an uncertain future; so much depends upon things beyond our control. I'm certain of one thing: it's had a very notable influence upon New Zealand life and character. There's been nothing quite like it anywhere in the world. There was something grand and spacious about the life, something which brought out the best in everyone and exaggerated all their peculiarities; as I said before, the High Country men are just a little more than life size. Up and down the South Island from Queenstown to the Awatere, the High Country life has been set apart from the rest of the country. The lads went up the gorge as boys, and there many of them stayed, to become such men as any country should be proud of. They formed a community of their own with its own talk and its own interests, and any man who became notable in that community was a man in the full sense of the word. It didn't matter whether they were owners, or musterers, packmen or rouseabouts, all of them were judged by the same standard—of courage and skill and endurance.

I shall always feel proud to have taken part in a life which has something epic about it; to have walked upon the hill with the musterers and to have lived the best part of my life amongst the mountains. My family have been born and bred "children of the misty gorges," and wherever they go and whatever they do, there is no finer heritage than that.

Highland Air

"A HIGHLAND glen upon a warm summer day has one of the freshest and most intoxicating smells that I know. I think that if I were struck blind and suddenly put down in such a place on such a day I would know where I was. I would smell that wide air which is not only clean and fresh, but is loaded with a number of rich and unmistakable scents—peat, bog-myrtle, pine trees, heather and something in the very quality of the earth itself."—Moray McLaren, talking about the Highlands in the BBC programme "On Knowing Britain."

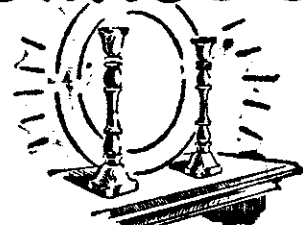


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