

Early Days in Canterbury

LETTERS FROM NEW ZEALAND, 1850-53, by Charlotte Godley, edited by John A. Godley; Whitcombe and Tombs; 21/-.

THE JOURNAL OF EDWARD WARD, 1850-51, introduction by Sir James Hight; The Pegasus Press.

(Reviewed by R. M. Burdon)

PPRIVATE letters, when written without thought of future publication, often contain aspects of the truth that are omitted from more responsible documents. Mrs. Godley's letters to her mother, which certainly fall within this category, have the added advantage of being written to one who was so completely ignorant of the New Zealand scene that the background of every event described has to be sketched in detail with nothing taken for granted.

The Godleys arrived at Port Chalmers in March, 1850, stayed there a few days (finding the place beautiful but the inhabitants "a very drunken set"), and then went on to Wellington, paying a brief visit to Port Cooper on the way north. The future capital was their residence for the next six months; during that time its climate, amenities, and inhabitants were the subject of Mrs. God-

ley's shrewdly observant comments. A Wellington man may be recognised anywhere "by his always having his hand on his hat." (Did that saying come into vogue the day the first settlers landed?) In the streets one saw Maoris of all ages playing with whipping tops. "A peculiarity of Maori babies is that they don't cry." The Lieutenant-Governor, Mr. Eyre, whose marriage is a subject of much gossip, is very unpopular and shamefully bullied by Sir George Grey. Mr. Domett is "quite a gentleman, and clever." Mr. Henry Petre would be quite good looking if his features had not "that sort of lengthened look that you may see in your own by consulting the back of a silver spoon."

When the first four ships arrived at Lyttelton, Mrs. Godley, as wife of the Canterbury Association's chief agent, was already there with her husband, her keen eyes taking in every detail of a strange environment, and until her final departure for England early in 1853 her letters continue to provide a running commentary on the life of colonists newly settled ashore. Visiting the Fitz Gerald's was always a trial, because of the "horribly ferocious bulldog" kept

chained at the front door, which tried to bite everyone who passed in. Mr. Fitz Gerald, by the way, used to wear "the most frightful long brown holland blouse, left very open, with a belt and turn-down collars, and on wet or cold days he sallied forth in the celebrated green plush shooting jacket." The news items served up for an absent mother's gratification have become a documentary source of great interest and considerable value. As an exile longing for home and not expecting to stay in Canterbury, Mrs. Godley wrote with the detachment of a mere onlooker at the passing show of early colonial life. Accounts of the settlement's progress, voluminous and pragmatical, may be found elsewhere, but as an intimate picture of a segment of English society conditioning itself to strange surroundings these letters are unique.

Mention is made in them of "three Mr. Wards, brothers, the youngest about fifteen, and Irish . . . and very nice." The eldest brother, Edward, kept a diary, now published by the Pegasus Press in a handsome edition that is likely to find much favour with collectors. Covering the period from September, 1850, when the Charlotte Jane sailed from Plymouth, up till June 22, 1851, the day before the two eldest brothers were drowned in a boating accident, the Ward Journal serves admirably as an adjunct to the Godley Letters.

Possessing all the attributes of a first-class journalist, and obviously writing with a view to being read, if not actually published, at some future time, Edward Ward is more restrained than Mrs. Godley in his personal references, only showing faint signs of irritation when the Honourable James Stuart Wortley abuses his hospitality, or when Lord Frederick Montagu makes a beast of himself in public. Ward must have taken pains to set down his thoughts in orderly fashion. The entries in his diary are carefully purged of boring details and free from monotonous repetition, even on the long outward voyage when one day must have been very like another. After an exploring expedition across the plains from Riccarton to Oxford (a much overrated place in his opinion) he took up 100 acres on Quail Island and went to live there with his two brothers. From then onwards, until the fatal accident, stockraising and housebuilding are the main themes of his daily chronicle.

How much richer the early records of Canterbury would have been if Edward Ward had survived, if Charlotte Godley had stayed longer! For the sake of the future one hopes that someone today is writing social intelligence reports comparable with hers, or that some diarist, who sees the essentials of the contemporary scene as clearly as Ward, is committing his impressions to paper.

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