

EARTHQUAKE TOWN

by LAWRENCE CONSTABLE

SURE in the promise of scenic bounty, we must overlook the first stage across Cook Strait. Around midnight, sleep is violated by the advent of French Pass. While the sound of chains and winches vibrates overhead, passengers stir in their berths and take stock of their discomfort. There is always a chance the tides may prove unkind, in which case Nelson may be two hours late in coming alongside; the shipping company accepts no responsibility in the matter.

All things being equal, however, we may breakfast in Nelson within sight of the city's truncated cathedral. Trafalgar Street is only just astir. Shutters are being taken down and doors opened. Cyclists' bells and a passing bus, leisurely provincial sounds that yesterday were submerged in the hum of the capital's traffic.

At nine o'clock we board a southbound bus and the countryside opens before us, a broad expanse of cultivation. Across it, the road cuts a section of field and farm, garden and orchard.

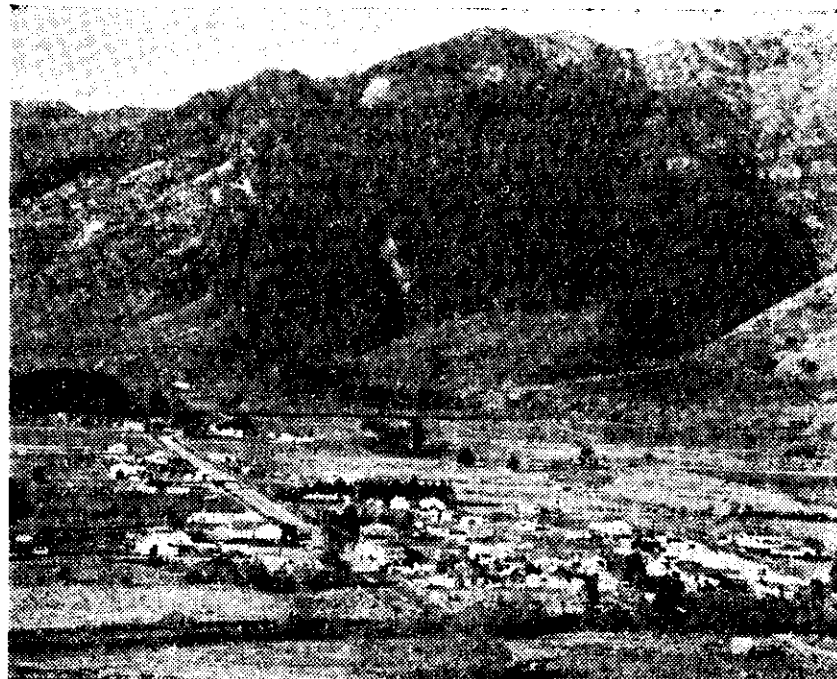
But as the hills close in and the long climb begins to the heights of Hope Saddle, the forest reaches over from Westland. Above the wooded hills of the foreground, range upon range, the high points of three provinces lift into view; then the road falls swiftly to Glenhope in the upper basin of the Buller. The railway ends here, twenty miles short of Murchison. But beyond Glenhope a ghost train runs on through cuttings, tunnels, stations, embankments—all of them empty of rails. Many years have passed since work ceased on the Glenhope-Inangahua section. The country is formidable, but if we are to believe Nel-

son's hampered business people, not impossible; and there is still a campaign to "close the gap" between railheads.

POLITICALLY you are still in Nelson, but geographically this country is Westland. The bush is heavier, and so is the rainfall. The people are different, too. Their fathers rejected the ways of the city for the rigorous life of the bush, and their character survives in the children. In the valleys around Murchison a few early settlers still inhabit the decaying places of their prime. Since their day the road to Reefton has replaced the track to Quartzopolis, and Newman's runs cars instead of coaches. You will still occasionally find these old chaps in back-country bars, shrunken now like the world about them, yet alive with a deep vitality and vivid memories. Their lives are running out in the country they know, though it's no longer as they knew it.

In a country the size of New Zealand it comes as a surprise to travel two hundred miles and find only a single town. Eighty miles from Nelson on the Lewis Pass route to Christchurch, we come to such a place. A scatter of tidy square houses and farms appears on the Four River Plain, which opens unexpectedly between the hills; and here is the township of Murchison. To New Zealanders, however, Murchison is not so much the name of a town as the name of an earthquake, the great shake of 1929 which made itself felt over the entire country. Hills in this district still carry the scars of 1929, split hilltops and exposed rock-faces where landslips buried the bush.

NOT the least remarkable thing about Murchison is its sense of quiet. The stillness that prevails is due not only



"Murchison survives, founded on the rock of its situation"

to its isolation in the high country of the Nelson province, but to the unusual absence of wind. During the winter the line of tip-tilted peaks above the settlement is sometimes hidden by fog for weeks at a time; but in summer a breathless heat stifles all activity except on the Matakita riverbank. Some would say it was an ominous quiet. But they are the folk who remember the winter morning 21 years ago when disaster enlarged the name of their town on maps all over the world.

In the light of later events, there are still people in Murchison who recall the premonitions that came to them in early June of 1929. Some curious

phenomena are on record—most of them connected with the sounds heard in the district for a fortnight before the disaster. These sounds have been likened to explosions; at the time they were, in fact, put down to blasting in the nearby hills. Others recall hearing unaccountable noises in open country—thunder from a clear sky, or the roar of traffic far out in the bush—eerie effects for which there is now a sound geological explanation, but which were then puzzling and not a little unnerving.

The earthquake itself started at 10.17 on the morning of June 17. It struck with a violent up-and-down motion of a force that made the hills crackle and set the church-bell clanging in alarm.

A customer escaped from the barber's chair in double-quick time, leaving the barber hesitating. "For myself, I felt there was no need to run. I tried to hold up a mirror which began to wobble. Then all the contents of the shop were about my ears. At last I reached the door, and hung on for a moment, I was fortunate, for my chimney was at that moment hurled out in front of the building. Then with my hands over my head, I struggled on to the road."

The force of that first shock wrecked every building in Murchison. Roofs caved in, chimneys toppled, houses swivelled off their piles, and Hodgson's store heeled over at a ridiculous angle. Most people found it impossible to keep their feet, and some were affected by a physical nausea. Fences writhed and fell. Animals fled. In those few moments Murchison's whole skyline was changed. A shooting party on the hills above Rotorua later described how the lake rocked from side to side in its bed like water in a basin.

SUCH was the enormity of the disaster that many predicted Murchison would never recover, that residents would refuse to come back. Yet Murchison is still there, four hundred strong, neater and newer-looking than otherwise it might have been, and certainly better known. It waits, pretending to be

(continued on next page)

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

(Solution to No. 558)

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Clues Across

- A source of light and a victim overlap slightly here; does this sound fishy? So it does!
- These may be found on shirts as well as trousers.
- Mice mixed up in the bread—no wonder this kind of banquet is imaginary.
- Cancel.
- "I waked
To find her, or ever to deplore
Her —, and other pleasures all abjure
(Milton's "Paradise Lost")."
- What's the clue here? Ask Ted.

Clues Down

- Title of a play by Galsworthy.
- "The — and vanity of this wicked world"
(The Catechism).
- Invert part of a coin in the sky.
- Slight change in reaction to a product of the dress-designer's art.
- Deserted infant of unknown parents.
- Unequal-sided.

- Pepys called her "Pretty, witty —."
- Alpine or rock plant.
- Neat sign found in the garden.
- It may be found on your finger, or in your hand; in either case, a large one is better than a small one.
- "Squat like a —, close at the ear of Eve" ("Paradise Lost").
- Male hawk.
- Not quite mended.
- "She gave me for my pains a world of —" ("Othello," Act 1, Scene 3).

No. 559 (Constructed by R.W.C.)

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