

NINE HOURS TO CROMWELL...

"IN one minute," the loudspeaker voice predicted, "the train now standing at the main platform will depart for Central Otago."

Defiantly the engine driver got down from his footplate, and standing off from the engine, studied its workings akimbo. He did not appear to be satisfied.

I got into carriage "C" and helped the other five passengers dust it. For a moment or two I had an illusion of movement: some wagons were buffeted past on the left and a suburban moved out on the right. The loudspeaker voice, it seemed, had spoken out of turn. Our line of mixed goods and cattles continued gently oozing steam for another quarter of an hour.

At 8 o'clock, with a violent wrench of couplings, the express for Central made good its departure, and trundled out through the suburbs. For a while Dunedin lay about us, smoking under a white frost.

In due course the guard came for a look at our tickets.

"Guard," said a tweed coat, roping himself closer in his scarf, "this carriage is filthy. Look at the dust. Look at it."

"Yeah," said the guard, looking at it without surprise, "it's pretty bad, all right."

It was somehow disarming to have him in tune with us, though no more rewarding than if it had been one of Dunedin's more sober mornings and an Otago barney had ensued. With the landscape full of the winter sun, the carriage was dusty and that was that; and while we toiled across coastal Otago, a hospitable belt of well-groomed fields and tidy fences, their gates all threatening a ten-pound fine, it was hardly possible not to feel at peace with the world.

SHORTLY the prospect changed. The country took on a scrubrier look, a browner complexion. Save for a river the colour of chicken broth, the Taieri, the line hereabouts is unaccompanied: one sees no roads. The railway follows the river through a bare, stony gorge well equipped with tunnels and bridges. In the tunnels everything shook: Emmett himself would have been fascinated.

This line by the Taieri is only one of the many sections in New Zealand whose origins were beset by political recrimination. No less than seven different routes were once entertained, and it seems probable now that the wrong one was finally chosen. So long, in fact, did this 130-mile length of track take to reach Cromwell that the mining industry, which in 1879 had given the railway its initial impetus, had all but died out when the first train clattered through in 1921. Depression, changing ministries, vigorous topography and the feverish functioning of all the parish pumps in the vicinity combined to impede the costly progress of the railway into Central. As for its reaching Hawea and Hokitika, via the Haast Pass, as was once enthusiastically mooted, fifty

miles of this distance are still awaiting so much as a road. Small wonder the trains go slowly in Otago.

TEN years the engineers were putting their railway through the Taieri Gorge, ten years where even today stations are no more than a formality for the timetable. Yet each habitation along the line we acknowledged with a halt. At Parera we stopped long enough to read the *Daily Times*—the man who lives at Parera did so while we waited, and pronounced himself disgusted with Gromyko. From time to time there were even less accountable stops, filled only by the gasping of the engine.

From the gorge we emerged at length into a district whose name unites the old world with the new: Strath-Taieri. With the Rock-and-Pillar Range ahead, half-clad in snow, the country began to look human again. Soon the trees came back: the willows were ghosts, but a group of pines stood formally round Puke-rangi, loyal to green. A few dusty roads reappeared, the sort presented on maps by tentative dotted lines at the edge of exploration. The train ran hooting across a plain grotesque with rocky outcrops, a gallery wearhered by the centuries into fierce and beaky shapes. Amongst them, a rural interlude, lies Middlemarch.

THE first train to Middlemarch which should have got there in 1881 was ten years late. This constitutes a record for the line. We were more fortunate to arrive only thirty minutes behind schedule. While passengers refreshed themselves (tea unrailwaylike in paper cups, and fragile sandwiches in bags), and the train was worked in a broth of activity, I wandered in Middlemarch and regretted my haste in passing through. The day had something to do with it: brilliant sunshine and air dry and crisp. It gave the land, undulant to the mountain, a fondness for the eye. Between extremes, inland Otago rejoices in weather like this mindful of the summer, yet tempered by the snow that winter has spread on the ranges. Little of newness offends Middlemarch. A row of old men were leaning on the Post Office, absorbing the sun and watching the day go by. Like the town itself, they belonged to the landscape. They doffed their pipes at me as I passed, and said nothing, only followed me with their eyes: mariners look thus on a case of mal der mer.

FOR the next fifty miles the railway climbs gradually through the Maniototo, a broad, scorched plain enclosed

...The Logbook of a Leisurely Pilgrimage by LAWRENCE CONSTABLE

by mountains. This is the home of skating and curling in the sub-zero months of the year. It is the home, too, of millions of rabbits, most of whom sat and watched our passing with supreme unconcern: the Minister of Agriculture would not have been pleased. We drew in at Hyde, one of the old gold towns; a hotel, a store, a bowser, and perhaps a dozen houses.

"Hyde's going ahead," said an old Otago man, approving what he saw. I



N.P.S. photograph

CROMWELL

"This is the heart of Otago, its geographic centre"

felt personally that his enthusiasm was getting the better of him. "She's a wild town, this," he went on, regarding the innocent cottages knowingly. "Or was," he corrected himself. Indeed she was; Hyde may never have been a large name in the miners' geography, but not every boom town had the distinction of being moved half a mile en masse when gold was found on its site. Hyde, in fact, was busier by far in the sixties than ever in railway days.

We travelled on across a plain whose breadth was all tussock; above it, dignified, the ranges lay deep in a white fabric. The train moved without haste, taking on water, putting off luggage, rambling across the Maniototo to Ranfurly.

Ranfurly lacks the atmosphere of the older towns of Otago, and it wants trees. It counts its significance only from the arrival of the railway in 1898, and because of this, has claimed the importance that once belonged to more historic Naseby, ten miles away. I liked Ran-

furly, though it had little enough to offer. In the shade the puddles were still solid. We sat at lunch in a rather handsome restaurant where we had perforce to eat our pies out of paper bags. When in Rome . . .

AT Ranfurly we lost one of our three carriages, and some of our goods, a development which notably failed to improve our speed. Our train went wobbling as tiredly along as a Mozart adagio for wind instruments. At Wedderburn, the gateway to Ida Valley and highest point on the line, snow still lay about in drifts out of the sun. The track curved south then, through country foreign to those in the tourist business. Here were expanses wide enough and empty enough for the most fertile imagination, expanses sweeping from one huge broken-backed ridge to another, petrified, torn by erosion, and utterly bare of vegetation. The land reflected the sun, hurting the eyes, light without colour.

Only a handful of passengers remained: from time to time, as we came to small settlements of bachy little out-back houses, one of them would wake up and leave us. Like Ranfurly, these are mostly upstart settlements usurping the place of the old mining centres. Only Rough Ridge was once a gold town, but the residents have changed its name to Otarehua; in this respect they show no allegiance to the past. Many an old Otago settlement has been renamed, which is in some ways a pity; people nowadays tend to divorce the modern township from its history.

THROUGH the puckered foothills of the mountains, grey impoverished country where even the tussock yields to scabweed and star-thistle, we came at last to Alexandra. And yet here irrigation has made of a wilderness one of the Dominion's best fruit-growing areas, wresting from the desert fields and farms, oases of green. There was a twenty-minute delay at Alexandra before we faltered on to Clyde, where we stopped to demonstrate the engine to some small boys.

We sat there looking at the Dunstan, as Clyde used to be called. This small settlement was once the heart of the goldfields, a teeming place of thousands of miners, each with his claim on the fabulous banks of the Clutha. This is the country sung by David McKee Wright in his Station Ballads:

The frosts were hard in the wintertime
and the summer long and dry,
But the nozzles play on the big face now
and the tailrace is roaring by.
The luck is not what it used to be and the
ounces rather slow,
But these are the men who made the land
in the golden long ago . . .
The trackless wild is a thing gone by
and the roaring flood is tame,
And the railway runs with its noise and
smoke where the lonely waggon came.

Through the once-golden Clutha gorge to Cromwell our express rang with a great deal more noise and smoke than one would have thought necessary for three passengers and four half-empty vans. It is a fierce and desolate region whose crags look down on the largest river in the Dominion and on the debris of its past.

And at a quarter to five, this was the climax of the railway, with only the wind to meet us, fresh off the snow. Cromwell station is posted in the northern end of the gorge, about a mile short
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