

Is the N.Z. Housewife Inefficient?

HOUSEWIVES who couldn't believe their ears the other Sunday evening when they heard themselves described as another sees them have the chance this week to see whether they can believe their eyes. Here in black and white (to coin a phrase)—with one or two innocuous cuts in the script indicated in the usual way—is what EMILY CARPENTER thinks of the housewife in this country. Miss Carpenter is, of course, senior tutor in the Home Science Extension of the Department of Adult Education at Otago University. By the time this appears in print one reply to Miss Carpenter will have been broadcast—but there are probably as many more replies as there are New Zealand housewives.

THIS talk isn't an easy one to give and I enter upon it with considerable trepidation. Whatever her other failings, the New Zealand housewife doesn't lack voice when her feelings have been touched. Rather fearfully, I can imagine thousands of New Zealand women rising up in arms and saying scornfully, "Who's she to think she knows anything about us?" Can I safeguard myself and disarm critics by first telling you why I feel I do know something about you and what you do and think?

Our work mirrors the whole of home-making practices in New Zealand. People write to us from all over the country—thousands of letters every year—and we know just what problems are facing housewives throughout the Dominion. We're asked to speak at meetings and the subject chosen indicates the needs of the group. And in our classes for adults we have a wonderful opportunity to hear what problems women are discussing and for helping them to a solution. We've often followed up these clues with a radio talk on the subject, with the result that one woman cautioned her group, "Careful what you say, girls, or you'll be put in a radio talk."

Last year I travelled upwards of 20,000 miles through Otago and Southland, taught 400 women in dressmaking and home furnishing classes, and spoke to another 650 or more at meetings throughout the area. As for letters and telephone calls, I just couldn't say how many I've answered. So you see we do have more opportunities than most to see New Zealand housewives at work.

You may gather from this careful paving of the way that what I'm going to say isn't universally favourable. I've every admiration for the New Zealand homemaker. I feel she overworks and her efforts are unappreciated. She does a fine job in difficult conditions. But I also think many of her troubles she brings on herself. So let's be objective about it, shall we, and realise I'm not speaking about you personally, but about my impressions of New Zealand housewives as a whole.

Most homemakers here are keen to have attractive, healthy and happy homes. In fact, you might say they are home centred. All their thoughts, activities and energies are directed towards this goal. Quite happily many women work from dawn till dark, in inconvenient and ill-equipped homes, never knowing how hardly they're treating themselves nor wanting anything different. Even with homes that are well planned and labour saving, many women have no interests other than their house and their children.

Some people admire this whole-hearted devotion to home and family, and give New Zealand women the reputation of being superb housekeepers. But is this really true? Is it not misdirection of

energy to spend so much effort cooking and cleaning that one has no time or desire for outside interests? A housewife is an individual with rights to time to herself just as much as any other working man or woman. When she spends all her waking hours in household tasks, how can a housewife be a homemaker? How can she be a well-rounded personality, with thoughts and views on the social, political and cultural activities of the day? Such women are subservient to their homes. They let it fill their whole horizon instead of developing other interests. There are many factors that have led to this undesirable attitude developing. New Zealand women have never had an abundance of household help, not even in pioneer days. And ever since, the situation hasn't improved, till now with high wages and short working hours most people couldn't afford help even if it were available.

So the housewife manages a five or six-roomed house and a family of three or four children single-handed. She does it, too, in many cases without the assistance that a well-planned house equipped with labour-saving devices can give. Two things have held back the introduction of washing machines, refrigerators, ironers and so on—first, the war delayed production of such equipment, and second, it held up the electrification of country districts. But a far bigger obstacle to easing the task of the housewife has been the attitude of the woman herself. Many women have a sneaking suspicion that it's not quite the thing to take advantage of labour-saving devices. Perhaps we're too near our pioneering background, and tales of backbreaking washing and cooking orgies still ring in our ears. People who think it's lazy to send your clothes out to the wash, or to use tinned foods, forget that life today is more complex than for our grandparents. . .

Perhaps, too, husbands' propaganda has something to do with a lack of labour-saving devices in the average home. So many people say they can't afford a washing machine or an electric sewing machine. In a country of 2,000,000 people, where £20,000,000 went through the totalisator last year, surely there is some ill adjustment between "needs" and "wants."

Few deliveries and the 40-hour week make conditions more difficult for the housewife, but she adds to the burden by her conservative attitude to new developments in the homemaking field. Take pressure cookers as an example. They have been used overseas for over 20 years, but only within the last few years have they been received with any enthusiasm in New Zealand. Quick frozen foods and ready mixes are



viewed with an equally sceptical eye. Such new products are judged by the standard of cost only, and therefore rejected. Harassed housewives should apply this test, "Will they free me from household routine and give me more time for my family and myself?" Surely then the expense is justified, even if it means economies elsewhere.

Though she works so hard, the typical New Zealand housewife is not really an efficient housekeeper. She doesn't use her head to save her heels. How many women take the time and trouble to think through their housekeeping, planning meals ahead? Do you see women with shopping lists made up in advance and with their housework plan written down? No, instead women make drudges of themselves going to the shops every day, or by working till 10 or 11 o'clock at night. When someone tells me they've been so busy they didn't sit down all day, I'm afraid I don't feel impressed. Maybe they have too much to do—I know some women have very heavy work loads. But perhaps also they don't budget their time efficiently. One may have to feed, clothe, and keep house for a family of five or six, but one doesn't have to do it the hard way. As well as her two hands, every woman has a brain to direct them.

However much many of our house-keeping methods may be laborious, unnecessary, and out-of-date, no one can deny that New Zealand women are superb bakers. Those cream sponges inches high, that come wrapped in a snowy table napkin to every country meeting! And those cream puffs, brandy snaps and fruit cake! Heavenly food. Baking is an art we excel in, hence, I think, our fondness for entertaining to afternoon tea. Making a cake is a very real means of self-expression for many homemakers.

But when it comes to cooking—ah, how different is the picture! In New Zealand, we have the best cheese, eggs, meat, milk, vegetables and fruit—in fact, we're the best fed nation in the world. Yet how uninteresting are the meals we serve! Those wonderful foods produced in such abundance are used so unimaginatively in the average home or hotel. One of our tutors has a tale to tell of being served bacon and eggs five times in three days while on circuit, and we all know that will be on the hotel menu from Auckland to the

Bluff. Well-cooked more often than not—but, oh, so uninspired.

Of course, our Anglo-Saxon ancestry is to blame—we've brought British food habits and prejudices with us. But the influence of new settlers is beginning to be felt and we're getting inquiries about how to cook foreign foods. I'm hopeful that the interest women now restrict to new recipes for cakes and biscuits will spread to new and varied ways of cooking and serving meats, vegetables and fruits.

In their efforts to improve the appearance of their homes, our women are handicapped by the very poor range of furnishing materials available in this country. It's practically impossible to buy a quality fabric of good design and colour in a medium price range. And because women don't have ready access to overseas homemaking magazines, they don't know what they're missing and continue to buy what is available instead of demanding what is suitable. Another lack is that homemaking magazines produced in New Zealand are not in colour, so our women are unaware of the gay colourful homes in which women in other parts of the world live. Our homes tend, then, to be insipid in colour and character.

How does the New Zealand housewife spend her leisure time? Perhaps here some of you will give a hollow laugh and ask, "What leisure time?" It is true that an average homemaker with an average home, an average family and an average income, has little leisure. When she has finished washing and ironing, cooking and cleaning for the day you'll find her spending the daylight hours in the garden, and the evening is devoted to knitting, sewing or craft work—not always because she has to, but because she wants to. New Zealand women find self-expression in these useful arts rather than in more cultural pursuits.

She does not always select wisely the things she does in her spare time. The present craze for making flower sprays out of dyed nylon stockings is an example of misguided energy in nine cases out of 10, and to our everlasting shame I have heard of women pasting gold lace on cut down beer bottles to make vases! I think that women's organisations are to blame here, for in their eagerness to have a demonstration at their meetings they do not always screen the prospective demonstrator, as is done overseas.

Some of our spare moments are devoted to entertaining, and once again, the burden falls on the housewife. In New Zealand it's not the custom to "eat out," and as well as producing three meals a day—or should I say six?—for the family most of the year, the housewife has to cater for friends, too. No doubt if we had more and better restaurants we would take mother out for an occasional meal and entertain away from home more frequently.

The cares of home and family become a full-time occupation and an all-absorbing interest for many housewives. This should not be so, for never in history have there been times when well-informed world-minded people were more needed. All our lives are touched by thoughts and events in other lands, and "Down Under" is "Next Door" to every nation on the earth in this Jet Age. . .

A housewife, then, should be qualified not only in the art of keeping house; she should always have a worthwhile hobby or interest of her own and be equipped to think and act intelligently on the social and political problems of

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