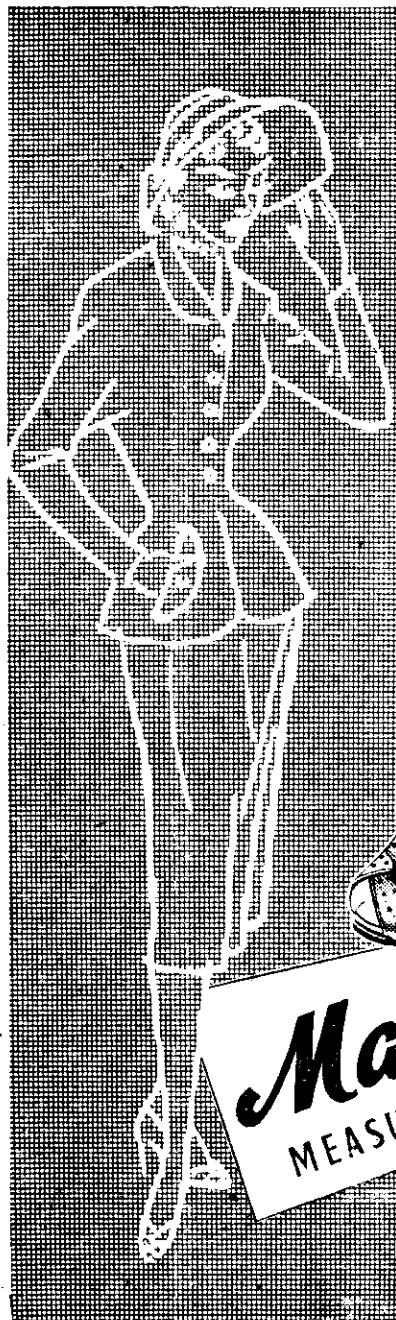
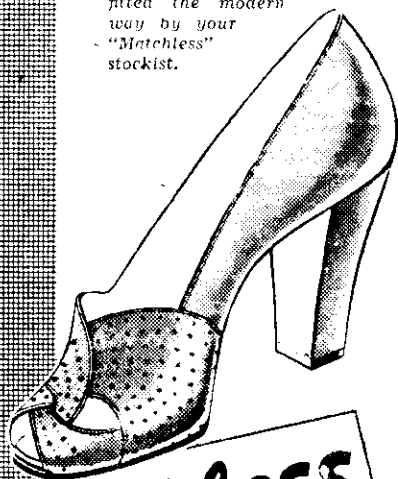




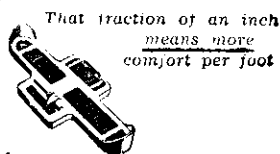
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Every Friday

Price Fourpence

OCTOBER 9, 1953

Editorial and Business Offices: 115 Lambton Quay, Wellington, C.1.

G.P.O. Box 2292.

Telegraphic Address: "Listener," Wellington.

Telephone 70-999.

Humour Becoming Literate

HUMOUR is pleasant to meet and share, but dull to read about. Philosophers who try to explain why we laugh are seldom lively; and if the subject is treated as an aspect of national character it is quickly hedged in by defensive opinions. New Zealanders, however, have been told so often by their own critics of an alleged deficiency in humour that they should feel neither surprise nor offence when the same charge is made by a visitor. The comments of Professor Joseph Jones, of Texas, reported last week in an interview, were entirely objective, and interest was added to them by comparisons with the colonial outlook in America. What he said of our small literature was true enough to make us want to look for explanations.

New Zealand writers are more often serious than otherwise; but this may be partly because they have been most active in kinds of writing which elsewhere are not expected to be funny. The English comic genius was already at full strength in the narrative poems of Chaucer. Afterwards it found its place on the Elizabethan stage, where it could never quite prevail against the tragic mood (even Falstaff had to die too soon, and off-stage at that); but it reached its perfect medium with the rise of the novel. Fiction gives a writer room to move about and relax, and its central interest is the portrayal of character. Not all English novels have humour, but comedy is at the heart of the tradition. Very few good novels have been written in New Zealand, and the best of them have been published abroad. If the most popular literary form is not yet established here, it cannot be surprising if we are slow to collect our own gallery of comic figures. But this need not mean an absence of humour. If the impulse is strong enough it will find its means of expression. Most of our best writing so far has been poetry, and Professor

Jones has pointed out that it has touches of humour, mainly satirical.

Presumably, then, there is laughter in these islands; and its echoes should be heard more frequently as writing grows in volume and variety. Literature in a small and young community passes through a self-conscious stage before it broadens into full expression. The expansive humour of colonial days was partly a product of isolation, and was local in character. It was lost in the quick transition to nationhood: there was no intermediate phase of steady growth, as in America. When writers tried to speak for the nation, they felt simultaneously the cultural thinness of their own environment and the overpowering strength of English literature. People laugh at themselves more easily when they are a little older, and are sure of their place in the world.

New Zealanders like to laugh as much as other people, perhaps even as much as the English or the Americans; but for the time being they do it better in private than in public. We have no native drama, and radio comedians who know that their audience will compare them with Jimmy Edwards, Dick Bentley and Ted Ray are in need of heroic self-assurance. Moreover, New Zealand humour is rather quiet—an addiction to banter and leg-pulling which could easily be overlooked or misunderstood. On occasion, as in the Ranfurly Shield parades in Hamilton and Wellington, it can produce the genial insult. The jokes may be crude; but everybody knows what they mean, and they come straight from the life of the country. Literate humour will grow with the population; and if the present signs are reliable this means that it will grow rapidly. Meanwhile, the beginnings can be seen, in writings as widely different as *Me and Gus* and *Arawata Bill*, and in the cartoons of Lodge and Minihinnick. Laughter is not yet "holding both his sides," but there are some faint and hopeful rumblings.

N.Z. LISTENER, OCTOBER 9, 1953.