

often that was all apparently there). The temperature through the night would have made a frog shiver; the floor of the van where we lay with a mail-bag for a pillow was as hard as boards. That night, as we travelled, the South Island seemed to stretch its width until it was as broad as it was long.

A hard floor and cold night air were no more comfortable to the stranger than they were to us. He began to talk and we to listen. His stories were of the sixty years he had lived in Otago Central as a rabbit-trapper, blacksmith, farmer, and soldier (for two weeks he'd been a soldier. Then *they* found he had a bad leg. He couldn't do the quick march, they said. Back to Otago Central he was sent to trap rabbits. It was something he had been sorry about ever since). For grazing, in some parts for cropping too, Otago Central country, with enough rain, was as good as any in New Zealand; usually, however, with the rainfall averaging about 15 in. a year only (and in some parts less) it was too dry. The result was a "country made for rabbits." Daylight was to show us the truth of what he said; our travels in the next week were to prove it beyond doubt. Otago Central is the rabbits' own country; in some back country blocks they share it with nothing, not a person, a sheep, or, it seems, a blade of grass.

This farmer, an old man now with a face like a contour map, who after three days was returning to his run to untie his dogs, was like many other of the "old identities" we were to meet all through Otago Central. They are in every township, not now as active as in their younger days, but more talkative; often they are older than the houses in which they live; sometimes they have been in the district longer than the township; one had planted the tree under which he was sitting, and its shade covered the street. In the van of the train that raw morning the old man told us of madly excited mining days, when gold was often in greater supply than flour, of coaches and bushrangers and sweeping floods, of cooking on a sheep-station when the menu was solely and uninterruptedly mutton, tea (without milk), and sour bread—twenty-one times a week, not

counting morning tea, afternoon tea, and supper, which was tea (without milk) and bread sometimes for a treat cooked, still sour, with currants.

But his concern was not only with the past. If we were thinking of taking up farming in Central his advice was, "Clear out the rabbits and get a good wife. Both were essential. It's no good else—I know, because I did neither. But it's grand country, and Bob Semple has a great head on him for irrigation; that's the thing." He left us in the early morning light to saddle his horse for the journey to his run behind Drybread. "I hate the snow," he said, "and winter's coming on. I'd like to move into a pub for winter quarters; I could take the dogs, a neighbour would have the horses, but what about the sheep?" He growled off.

Morning slammed the sun over the top of high hills. All through a night as black as a musterer's billy we had seen nothing but, occasionally, the black form of black hills, the suggestion of height, the line of flatter country; we had heard the rush of rivers and pounded over bridges. Miles had passed without a light. Between stations, at times, the distance had seemed never-ending. Without seeing, we had groped through the districts of which Middlemarch, Hyde, Ranfurly, Wedderburn, and Ida Valley are the main centres.

With daylight came transformation. We were in a new world. In no other part of New Zealand is there anything similar; and what we saw was typical of Otago Central except in and round the towns and where irrigation, bringing the softer colour of live trees and green growth, had relieved this unrelenting ferocity of Nature.

On all sides huge ugly blocks of hills and mountains jagged into a sky that seemed to have drawn back fearfully. Giant crocodiles or prehistoric monsters with armour-plated backs, they lay not stirring, waiting, it seemed, for their victims; the smashed gulches and torn-out valleys were the eyes, the high-flung razor ridges the teeth. None of the majesty of New Zealand mountain scenery was to be seen that morning, but the effects were certainly no less striking;