

Our New Zealand Tour

A talk to the Women's Institute

Madam President and Fellow Members:

When my husband and I decided to go to New Zealand we had no idea of the enjoyable life lived on these big ocean-going liners. They are tiny worlds, lovely to look at and lovely to live in. In bathing, playing games, dancing, relaxing, visiting the shop, the cinema, the hairdresser and the library the days pass in great comfort and contentment, and in these days of little help at home it is very very nice being waited on – even to the preparation of one's morning bath – by efficient stewards. We were fortunate in getting a large airy cabin on the port side of the Rangitoto going out, and on the starboard side of the Stratheden coming home, so that we enjoyed the maximum of comfort.¹

My first impression was one of surprise at the vast amount of water in the world. The boat raced past the Azores and the Guadeloupe group – otherwise we saw nothing but sea and sky for the first ten days.

And then we reached Curacao, a great thrill to me to see for the first time a tropical island peopled with colored folk and to see the tropical trees, giant cacti, and the lovely hibiscus, poinsettiae and bougainvillea. Oil has brought much prosperity to this Dutch island, and Williamstadt is very picturesque with its gaily painted houses, colourful women and quaint water market.

Three days later we reached the Panama Canal. Negotiating the locks was most interesting to watch and one marvelled at the engineering skill which made possible the raising and lowering of these great vessels with such apparent ease. It took seven hours to get through the canal and some parts reminded me of the Rhine, but the journey on the whole was interesting rather than beautiful. Panama we found prosperous, expensive and American. I have never seen so many luxurious cars, American of course. We hired one to take us around and our colored driver was quite gorgeous in beautiful white nylon shirt and excellent quality panama hat, while the women selling lottery tickets by the wayside were better dressed than I. The school girls were rather lovely. They all appeared to wear a uniform of white sailor blouse and skirt which with their dark skins was most attractive. Apart from watching the people I did not find Panama terribly interesting.

Another eight days of sunshine with just sea, flying fish, dolphins, and an occasional island for company, and then we saw little Pitcairn Island. The Rangitoto anchored and the Islanders, who came to meet us in little boats, swarmed up the side with fruit, flowers, beads and carvings. They are a

¹ The port (left) side was supposed to be desirable on eastbound voyages because it would face north, away from the sun. The Rangitoto was travelling south-west, so it's not clear what was the particular advantage of a port-side cabin.

healthy lot and speak good English as well as their native tongue. After and exchange of cargo and much chatter and laughter they rowed off into the sunset, singing melodiously as they went.

Yet another eight days of sea before journey's end. The weather became quite chilly and officers, crew and stewards went back to navy blue, which they had exchanged for tropical kit after passing the Azores. On November 5th, just a month after leaving home, we sighted New Zealand. The afternoon was wet and dark and the sea was rough, and very rugged, volcanic and forbidding the coast looked to me. Had I been an emigrant with no return ticket in my pocket my heart would have dropped to zero. But by the time we entered Wellington Harbour the sun shone and everything looked much better. The harbour is lovely with the gay little houses perched on the hills overlooking it.

We had to say goodbye to our friends and disembark the next day, and awoke to a perfectly ghastly spring morning, wet and cold like England at its most English. I had expected to find an abundance of cheap fruit and vegetables but was surprised at the prices – tomatoes 4/6 a pound, marrows 2/6, peas 1/10 etc. Shops were stacked with food, but it seemed impossible to get a meal. Labour is scarce and service is of the help yourself variety and rather rough. We were glad when it was time to settle into our snug sleeping berth for the night journey to Auckland.

Here the sun was shining and we were met by our relatives and taken by road and ferry to their charming bungalow at Takapuna. The NZ homes are charming, mostly wooden bungalows painted white – very cool and graceful. I wanted to bring one home with me and this is not as impossible as it sounds. Built as they are on low concrete pillars, it is no unusual thing for a man when moving to another district to take his house with him intact. The average kitchen seems much better equipped than at home. The top wall space is fitted with closed in cupboards, with a shelf at working height and cupboards under that, and every home has a separate laundry often with washing and ironing machines. Of course a refrigerator is a necessity in the semi-tropical climate of the North and most houses have a shower either in or adjoining the bathroom. The fuel for heating during the short winter is mostly wood, and the houses being wooden the fear of fire is quite a thing. Housewives don't arrange for the sweep to come on a given day as we do – he just arrives when he is due, and one dare not send him away. One came to the house while I was there and I was horrified as guests were shortly due for dinner, but he was so clean at his work that nothing was covered and the room needed no dusting afterwards.

Auckland has no shopping centre like Regent Street, Bond Street and Oxford Street. There are three or four shops about the size of Bobby's and some smaller ones of course. On the journey I was rather impatient of the fuss and talk about the London shops as I felt there were so many more important things to see in England, but when I had seen the main street of Auckland I

understood why it is quite the thing for a woman who has been home to have a party to show her London clothes to her friends.

The standard of hairdressing is not high. Girls seem not to be taught the clever finger work for setting but just clamp great grips on one's head.

My sister-in-law has a large circle of friends, and they were amazingly hospitable, entertained us royally, and loved to talk of home. I was invited to one of the famous Colonial morning teas, a scrumptious affair. One can be invited to morning tea, afternoon tea at 3-3.30, or just tea which is at about 5.30 when the husband and children all get home. This is quite a big meal. NZ housewives are excellent cooks and I'm afraid are not very impressed with the English brides who go out there.

The people we met casually were also very friendly. A little smug? Maybe, but they have everything – good food, good climate, good wages and easy hours. One wonders if they have not too much – if things are not too easy and if the country will be able to stand up to such a short working week. Service is poor. Milk is delivered, and bread put in a box provided and the right money must be left for it. Apart from bread and milk nothing is delivered. Post is left in little boxes at the gate and newspapers are just heaved over the hedge onto the lawn – wet or fine – by a boy who does not dismount from his bicycle. But in many ways NZ is a splendid country for children to grow up in. There is an abundance of sunshine, good food of course, cheap sport and yachting, a good free education and plenty of freedom. They wear the minimum of clothing and seldom shoes. Young people play hard-court tennis in bare feet. The courts are floodlit so that they can play in the cool of the evening. But I sometimes sensed – or imagined – an atmosphere of paganism, and there did not seem to be much cultural life. The children all travel half-price in the buses, but must never sit if an adult is standing. But with this bright picture I was surprised to learn from some doctor friends of the alarming amount of illness in the country. Goitre is very prevalent and the teeth are poor – all due probably to some soil or water deficiency. The incidence of insanity, too, causes great concern.

There is no colour question, and the Maoris take their place on an equality with the New Zealanders. They have a natural eloquence and fine enunciation, much better than the average Colonial one. The children go to the same schools and young people work and play together. We did see some entirely Maori villages, but the young people soon leave them to work in the towns.

Miss Jerome Spencer² is the indefatigable founder of the W.I. in NZ. There are about 900, including 40 Maori ones. At one place where Miss Spencer went to start a Maori Institute she found only men. When they had approved of what she had to say they clapped their hands and the women filed in.

² Ann Elizabeth Jerome Spencer brought the WI to NZ when she returned after working in England during the first war; the idea had come to Britain from Canada around the turn of the century.

Auckland being semi-tropical, every kind of fruit and flower grows in the gardens. The beautiful jacaranda blooms side by side with the red gum, and the pohutucawas with their flaming red flower line the roads and grow right down to the sea. But – and it is an important “but”, I think – the NZ bush is evergreen, which means that there are no woods of black wintry trees, so lovely with the red sunset behind them, no miracle of a hedge turning green almost overnight, no quivering young beech trees, so that they miss the ‘green gauze of April’s fragile garments’.³ We did not see many wild flowers but there is a marvellous large convolvulus of a heavenly blue which is a weed and climbs everywhere, and arum lilies without scent grow in profusion.

We spent three weeks on the Island of Dreams where my brother-in-law has a holiday home. There are no roads, only tracks through the Bush. The Bush is magnificent with the age old trees, myriad mosses, and lovely tree ferns, but there is so much of it that one longs for our softer beauty. When travelling by road it is the same. The scenery is rugged and grand and often very beautiful but the little towns are new and rather crude and the distances are so great that one wearies for our winding lanes, downland villages, thatched cottages and old farmsteads. There are no farms as we know them. Animals live always in the open and come to a shed, often a corrugated iron one, to be milked.

Of course we visited the famous thermal region. It is fantastic – the boiling lakes, plopping, bubbling pools of mud, steaming cliffs, the geysers throwing up water to a certain height at a given moment year in and year out, the Maori villages with hot swimming pools, food cooking over steam vents in the ground, piped boiling water to wash tubs and baths, and oh so many weird and wonderful phenomena. It fascinated us beyond measure. We saw, too, wonderful glow-worm caves, and stayed at an hotel overlooking one of the loveliest lakes I’ve ever seen, Waikaremoana. A guide took us climbing up and up for two hours through almost primeval native bush to another higher lake, and then by launch to a spot where we landed and climbed yet again to another tiny lake so deep that it has never been plumbed and so peaceful that we almost felt afraid to whisper. It was enchanting. It was at Waikaremoana that we heard the bellbirds and tuis⁴ in the early morning. They have a bell like note, and the whole air seemed filled with fairy chimes.

We had not intended visiting the South Island, but friends we made on the boat going out insisted that we must stay with them to see Christchurch. The time was short – too short to see more than the snow capped mountains of the Southern Alps in the distance. But we drove across the famous Canterbury Plain and were entertained at a sheep station growing Canterbury lamb for England. We liked Christchurch, the City of the Plains, very much; it reminded us of a small English university city.

The P&O boats do not touch NZ so we had a three and a half days journey to Sydney across the Tasman, and ran into the roughest sea of the whole voyage.

³ I can’t find the origin of this quotation. Did Granny make it up?

⁴ Tuis are one of the largest members of the honeyeater family.

Sydney folk are rightly proud of their magnificent harbour. It is a bustling city aiming at an American standard, I think. The Stratheden took on a great cargo of wool at Melbourne and we spent the three days with old friends who drove us around and pointed out the Englishness of the city. We then had one sweltering day at Adelaide, so that we did not see it at its best, and one day at Perth, city of great charm. The attractive houses are built on both sides of the Swan River and on the waterfront, and the city has a beautifully designed and conceived modern University.

The Stratheden now headed for home across the Indian Ocean. The passengers seemed to be mostly Australians floating home on wool profits and were a happy crowd. We tied up at Colombo, Bombay, Aden, Suez and Port Said, and I must confess that I find the old cities far more fascinating than the new. In spite of a certain amount of squalor they are so picturesque.

We raced through the Mediterranean Sea, which by the way was very cold with an icy wind blowing off the snow capped hills of Italy, and stopped at Marseilles where the wool which had taken three days to load at Melbourne was unloaded in six hours. We spent those hours exploring the city.

After the 30,000 miles we had travelled on sea and land, the South of France seemed just on our doorstep as it were and we quickly reached home—a marvellous holiday over, Tilbury on a cold foggy morning, all sunshine past, Euston murky, rain all the way from Victoria, but lovely Sussex and Home once more.