Letter from . . . Dunedin

On the front page

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As a lad I was often impressed by the variations that could be played on a theme—not necessarily enigmatic. The reporting of a given event in the *Daily Worker*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Mail*, and the *Telegraph*—we had no *Times* on my paper round—could be so disparate as to make one wonder if they were all talking about the same occasion. In Otago we do not have that problem with our one and only morning daily, the *Otago Daily Times*. To any Briton, the *Daily Times* might appear to be parochial, even on the front page, and occasionally trivial. There have been many, if transitory, newspapers in Otago since the establishment of the colony in 1848. Initially, in Dunedin, there was the *Otago News*. That suffered from the handicap of an outspoken proprietor who swam against the tide of the Calvinistic Scottish Presbyterian Establishment. He foundered from a politically contrived lack of circulation and the misfortune of ill health. In 1850 his defeat was completed by the purchase of his press by the Establishment, who set up the *Otago Witness* for its own purposes. The *Witness* was a pro-Establishment mouthpiece for a sad stream of invective bigotry that caused the new-found colony much disservice in its earlier years. Nevertheless, hands that feed may be bitten, and, despite the nepotic appointment of its editor, that voice began to rail against the Establishment. Consequently, the city fathers begat themselves another mouthpiece in 1856, the *Otago Colonist*, with which to combat the patricidal *Witness*. In 1861 the *Otago Daily Times* (ODT) appeared. It has now put 36 500 issues on the streets—apparently uninterrupted, despite the compositors' strike in 1886. I am sure, therefore, that I was not alone in my sense of sadness last year that this splendid record was broken by a printers' dispute. The milk having been spilt, however, the one day's loss in September due to an incomplete national strike was less important. The *Times*'s sister paper, the *Evening Star*, which rose in 1863, will set in November 1979. Recent rumours of economic weakness have travelled the common path of reassurances and denials (a condemnation in themselves, forsooth) until, in late October 1979, the printing on the wall was illuminated by a firm announcement of closure.

One issue in October

An interesting issue of the ODT during October brought this matter to the front of my mind, with the headline announcement that the road drivers' union had been awarded an 11% to 14% pay rise. Until last year the Government had proscribed free wage bargaining. This encumbrance was removed, and the Drivers' Federation sat down with their employers, and 11% was agreed. The Government's response was instantaneous, the

Prime Minister saying they could have no more than 9.5%. Then things happened quickly: the Federation of Labour, the big daddy of the unions, illegally called a national strike at 72 hours' notice (there is a legal obligation to give 14 days' notice of intention to strike), the Minister of Labour said they could not go to the arbitration court, and Prime Minister Rob Muldoon left the country. Well, the strike fizzled, the Labour Minister climbed down, the court made the award, and deputy premier Tallboys was left holding a slightly shamefaced baby while Rob went off to chair the International Monetary Fund and pour oil on the Palestine Liberation Organisation's troubled waters.

One might think that gesture uncharacteristically openhanded of Muldoon since we have little enough oil here anyway. We labour under weekends without petrol and one carless day per vehicle each week. All of which leaves us better off than Britain, where the price, always greater than ours, is unpredictable and finding petrol uncertain. In a nation which ranks high in the world score of cars per head of population, it is not difficult to minimise the inconvenience of the carless day. The Automobile Association assures us that its membership sees formal rationing as a preferable alternative. Nevertheless, there is a silver lining, for it is a pleasure to record that the annual death rate from road accidents has been declining steadily and consistently, apart from a slight hiccup in 1977, since 1973, when it was nearly 850. My newspaper gives me a figure that projects to a 520 total for 1979, and at the time of writing that appears to be but 80% of last year's slaughter.

Death again on the front page, this time of New Zealander Blair Peach. I was in Southall recently, and the most benign elderly lady I know said of him, immediately and simply, "He came looking for trouble and he got it." Who does one blame? The bare-faced provocation of the National Front picking its way through Southall, or the unbridled response of the political left? But what of the attitude which keeps the paper and lathe memorial indicating "Blair Peach died here" on the corner of an obscure back street of a working-class suburb of London? They have enough problems there with a social revolution that has left the elderly natives bewildered, without trying to turn it into a latter-day Munich and creating another Horst Wessel.

Earthquakes—a way of life

As I sat at my desk drafting this letter, I became aware of a strange swaying motion. It felt as if it arose from my chair—a gentle, rhythmic, side-to-side movement of my lower trunk. For two or three seconds I sat and made sure that the sensation really was there. Convinced, I then listened for two further signs. There was, however, no enigmatic rumbling from the night outside and, worse, the lounge door did not eject a querulous wife demanding to know what was going on. Good heavens, the problem was neither in my chair nor my buttocks. The enormous

range of devastating possibilities exploded before my frightened mind as there flashed the recall of John Pearce's description of the experience of carotid insufficiency. This drama, terribly protracted in the telling must have taken five seconds before, thoroughly alarmed by the combination of events and non-events, I went into the other room where my wife sat in a soft armless chair. Her response to my urgent inquiries was uncomprehending—then, thank God, I saw that the ceiling lights were swinging; gently, but with a traverse of about an inch, indubitably swinging. My cerebrovascular circulation was intact, and it was only an earthquake after all.

Earthquakes are part of the way of life for New Zealand to such a degree that there is an Earthquake and War Damage Commission chaired by the Finance Minister. It levies household insurance companies underwriting fire risk in order to offer central authority indemnity against these phenomena. In some areas of New Zealand, such as the west coast of South Island and the Cook Strait, 'quakes are a way of life, less so elsewhere. I have been aware of three earthquakes in Otago in the past six years. But in this country, which is built on steep tortured upheavals of rock, more or less thinly clad with earth, heavy rain provides a recurrent hazard of landslides. In Wellington city, for example, or on the coastal road and railway squeezing between the Kaikoura range and the sea on the east coast of the South Island, they are a recurrent event. The movement (locally spoken of as a slip) which occurred at Abbotsford on the south side of Dunedin in August was different.

Civil defence is a vociferous influence, and active in a country subject to earthquakes and slips as well as the liability of massive overflowing of rivers after days of rain on the high country. Such events may be disastrous in terms of stock losses, inundation, ruined pasture and crop fields, to say naught of flooded home and industry. The bizarre events at Abbotsford are highlighted by newspaper advertisements advising us of the role of civil defence. The destruction caused by an earthquake will take 10 seconds, they say, not 10 weeks as at Abbotsford. Ten weeks for the making of a civil disaster?

The main road south out of Dunedin, a relatively new dual carriageway, separates the community of Green Island, of which a major portion sits on the 500-foot hill on the south side, and Abbotsford, which is draped across a comparable rise on the north mamma of the cleft. In mid-June this year a pair of cracks 70 to 80 metres apart, curving in parallel round the west side of the hill appeared. The lower half of this perhaps 800-metre fault passed through a residential area. Immediately, houses within the delineated block of land began sinking or, if they lay across the faults, became crazily distorted by their broken backs. The agitation of the local residents, both emotional and political, was active and comprehensible, but official reaction appeared to be non-existent. It was not till the beginning of July that evacuations began. Demolition orders were served, but since no promise of Government compensation was forthcoming they were initially resisted. This was neither earthquake nor war damage, the argument seemed to be, and thus the question of compensation did not arise.

A dramatic series of photographs taken from 28 July to 5 August begins by showing the wife of the house standing waist-deep in the crack which is breaking the back of her house in the background. The final scene shows her adult daughter on the same site, standing on the sunken area with the reciprocal edge fully 3½ metres above her head, and the house a disintegrating ruin under leaden skies that continued to weep over the scene. Then suddenly on 8 August, on a cold dark night under a blanket of rain and sleet, the bottom dropped out of the chasm. It fell to 30 metres deep and moved down the hill in its self-created channel. That no lives were lost is credit to no one. Two days earlier the local authorities had declared a civil emergency and evacuation had been progressing since 6 August. It was in early July that it had been agreed that "land slip compensation" would be paid, and on 6 August the Cabinet agreed to subsidise, dollar for dollar (up to a quarter of a million) the national voluntary appeal that was well under way. At no

time was it declared a national disaster area, a declaration that would have committed the Government to expensive responsibility. By the morning of 9 August there was a great gouge round the hill of Abbotsford, with a reciprocal elevation due to excrement from the movement and simple uplifting of land at the bottom. The Sun Club, always discreetly hidden behind a fine range of trees at the eastern foot of the hill, was lifted 18 metres to expose its members to the gaze of the curious. The clearing up afterwards was the saddest sight. Sixty-nine residential properties were lost immediately into the gulf, or later bulldozed into the grave. Viewed from my property, a full half of the hillside, once totally residential, is now bare mud where it has been filled and smoothed, the 'dozers working two to three weeks continuously.

What was it all about? Well, there is an official inquiry to be held, but basically it seems that a bed of sand shifted underground in a subterranean "river" and, when it went, the topsoil more or less subsided into the space vacated and then followed it downhill. Not an earthquake, not the conventional movement of a slice of hillside. There is speculation about blame, if blame there be. I hope that the inquiry will be able to establish the peculiarity of the event as a once-only phenomenon. If it is not peculiar, the troubles of Abbotsford will be a permanent legacy, for the market value of properties will be in jeopardy for years to come. Out of all this came an example of another remarkable phenomenon, the quality of which is unusually high in New Zealand, and that is the generosity of the national community. The public appeal reached over \$857 000. Its use was to be compensation for lost land, for the Government would pay only for property either at its insured or Government valuation price. By now, most people have received more or less adequate dollar compensation for their property deprivation, either from the Earthquake and War Damage Commission or from the Abbotsford Mayoral Relief Fund or from both. Of the collected money, to which has been added the Government's quarter million, 80% has been distributed.

I imagine that it will be a little while before those 17 people who were trapped on a patch of sinking land on a cold wet, dark night, moving downhill at a metre a minute will be able to laugh as readily as did one woman who viewed the results of her panicky gathering of an armful of undies as "useful clothing" in the cold dawn of 9 August 1979.

A common predisposing factor in hepatitis B infection in men is homosexual behaviour. Should these contacts be routinely offered hepatitis B immunoglobulin after their hepatitis B surface antigen has been found to be negative?

Routine and regular administration of hepatitis G immunoglobulin (HBIG) to the HBsAg and anti-HBs-negative sexual partners of known HBsAg-positive carriers cannot be recommended. A single HBIG injection does not provide long-lasting protection, and in cases of repeated exposure the effectiveness of short-term treatment with HBIG has not been conclusively shown. Although the spread of infection in sexual contacts of HBsAg carriers is common, it is often a fait accompli. In one study over 80% of the sexual contacts of HBsAg, HBsAg carriers had serological evidence of past inapparent infection. In the event of a homosexual exposure to a known HBsAg carrier, however, it would be reasonable to give 5 ml of hepatitis B immunoglobulin (obtainable from the Department of Health) as soon as possible after exposure within seven days, and then again one month later. In a study of accidental needlestick exposure to HBsAg-positive blood, HBIG proved effective in preventing hepatitis in 70% of cases. When the assay for the *e* antigen and DNA polymerase becomes more widely available, HBIG administration will probably be reserved only for those exposed to serum shown to be positive for either viral marker. The absence of these markers usually implies low infectivity.

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