

Wrote First Novel When He Was Desperately Ill

WHEN John Brodie, whose mother lives in New Plymouth, wrote his first book, "The Little Country," he did not think he had long to live. Its main fault was merely an overcrowding of characters, says the Australian magazine, "People," in a recent profile on this well-known author. But this was understandable, for there is a lot for a young man to say when he feels he may never have another chance to express himself.

The article recalls that Brodie, whose writing name is John Guthrie, wrote his first book when he was 26, while recovering from the amputation of his right leg, a disaster which resulted from a football injury. The spirit which enabled him to write a novel then—plus the devoted nursing of his mother—pulled him through that early crisis.

While he was convalescing, he wrote another book, "So They Began," and then set off for England, the sentimental and intellectual home of so many New Zealanders. He did not like England. He thought it an unfriendly place and dying on its feet. "There were only a dozen members in the House of Commons and most of them were asleep the night I went there."

But his second visit, which stretched through the war and after it, has changed his opinion about Britain. After his first visit, in 1935, he went back to New Zealand to work as a journalist in Wellington. Then he went to England again, "got the feel of it" and would have stayed if he could have found a job he could enjoy. But London does not care about the feelings of any stranger who tries to entrench himself; it is interested only in performance. So John Brodie headed for home, full of new experience and, most important of all, secure in the knowledge that his physical setback had not prevented him surviving in London.

NIGHT-FIGHTER EXPERT

When World War II began, on September 3, 1939, Brodie was in New York. As soon as he heard the news, he cancelled the rest of his passage home and bought a ticket back to London. He felt there was not much he could do to help, but he was determined to contribute what he could. As it happened, he was able to get into the R.A.F. and, although they would not let him fly, he became an expert in night-fighter tactics, propelling himself around a secret airfield in Britain on a bicycle with a lot of other R.A.F. cyclists, to perfect a system of ground-to-air control. These tactics paid dividends in the Battle of Britain and in subsequent night fighting.

Brodie has written eight books—seven novels and a portrait of his father, "The Man in Our Lives," which he considers his best work.

He was too busy to write during the war, but he has produced five novels since, plus the "portrait" of his father. None of his books has become a best-seller, but his reputation as a novelist has grown steadily. Two of his books have been published in America and he is now well established in Britain.

In New Zealand, of course, his stature as a writer is much greater. Perhaps the most rewarding feature of Brodie's writing, from the reader's angle, is his versatility. His five post-war novels have each had a different setting, style and attitude. "Journey By Twilight" is the story of a neurotic R.A.F. pilot, "Is This What I Wanted" relates the problems of

a newspaper editor in a crumbling world, "Merry-go-round" is a most entertaining satire on the British Arts Council, "Paradise Bay" is a nostalgic story of his home town and has been described by leading critic Marghanita Laski as "a minor classic," and "The Seekers" has hit the Rank Empire jackpot.

HOME TOWN CRITICS

Brodie proposed going home early this year but his plans were frustrated by illness. He is determined that it will be merely a postponement. He had been scheduled to address the New Plymouth Literary Society and give a broadcast



JOHN BRODIE . . . hit the jackpot.

as the local boy who made good—prospects that he viewed with some dread, because he is not a vain man. Indeed, his only stories about himself are mocking ones, full of the gentle irony which gives novels their character.

One of the troubles about being an author from a small town is that the writer's family tend to become spirited critics—not on the grounds of literary quality but because they have to live with the neighbours who, rightly or wrongly, feel they may have been caricatured "in one of Jack's books." Brodie has been patiently explaining for years that "no author lifts people from real life. They are amalgams of remembered facets of individuals and pure imagination."

He is right, of course, but it is one thing to be right far away in the security of London and another to avoid the accusing eye of a neighbour who bails you up in the main street and asks how "Jack" is getting on in England. This constant family watch on his antics bothers Brodie a lot, but it does not stop him writing the way he pleases. He has *long since discovered that the best thing*

to do is ignore them or put them, or bits of them, in a book themselves. When he does, they love it.

During 1952, when he was 46, Brodie married an attractive American, Elinor Roddam. They now live in London's exclusive Eaton Square surrounded by a Regency elegance contrived by Mrs. Brodie and enlivened by her own paintings. Brodie says his wife is "much better than any heroine I've dreamed up" and confesses he is immensely pleased with himself for having found her.

Any time he returns to New Zealand, he and his wife become the centrepiece of a family reunion with his mother, his sister, Mrs. Russell Matthews, of New Plymouth, his civil engineer brother, Lex and his farmer brother, Alan. His other sister Anne Palethorpe, is living in London. All the time he is in his hometown everyone who knows him will be wondering if Brodie is going to put them in a book. They need not worry. He is probably engaged on a story which has its background in London's West End.

WRITES IN AN OLD EXERCISE BOOK

Brodie will not say if there is a new book on the stocks, however. He works with an almost fanatical lack of fuss. His recipe for writing a novel is "to get it all down in an old exercise book, then type it out and get it off to the damn publishers."

There is nothing more depressing than having a book about to be published, he thinks. "The only thing to do then is to start writing another." His advice to young writers—"get published and keep on writing." It is as easy—and as difficult—as that.

Brodie's writing has all been done in his spare time from newspaper work—he has edited a book magazine in London and been columnist and writer on World's Press News, a newspaper trade weekly. For any other professional writer who claims there is no time for creative work at the end of a busy newspaper day, Brodie advises "get on with it." "The Seekers" is the result of this method. So was his first book, his second and all the others.

One of them—the funniest one—was written largely in bed during London's great "freeze" winter of 1947, when all the heat Brodie had was a flicker of light in his bed-sit, gas-ring—"enough to boil the kettle if you kept it on all day." He put on his clothes, his overcoat and hat and climbed into bed. Then, picking away at his vintage typewriter (which has been held together with sticking-plaster since before the war) he "got on" with "Merry-go-round."

The rewards for writing? Not much in the way of money, but a great deal in the feeling of attainment and a share in the life of literary London, which he would never have dreamed of achieving 20 years ago, when he wrote on the sunlit home veranda of his convalescence.

The year before the illness which crippled him, Brodie played football for a New Zealand university team that toured Australia. He was a hot tip for a Rhodes Scholarship, might even have achieved that even greater New Zealand honour—a place in the All Blacks. But it was not to be; instead he has become a novelist.

"If I had not had my life interrupted when I did, I would probably have put off writing until I was 40 and then never have got around to it," he said recently. "Maybe that would have been a good thing."

He does not really believe this, of course. The only thing Brodie never gets serious about is himself.