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SPARE-TIME AUTHOR FROM MAORILAND

John Brodie has now written eight books and has watched one turned into a movie, the outdoor scenes being shot in his native New Zealand

MOST fiction writers have to be awful liars and it is only when they see a film made from one of their books that they realise the extent of the liberties they have taken. This experience came to New Zealand author John Brodie toward the end of last year when he went to Buckinghamshire to see a Maori tribe attack an English settler's hut.

The Maoris, gleaming and ferocious in the gentle mists of Pinewood, where J. Arthur Rank is making a film *The Seekers,* stormed a rough wooden hut sheltering Jack Hawkins and Glynis Johns. They set fire to it and the stars (although it was not in the script) escaped just in time. Hawkins lost an eyebrow and Miss Johns was covered in ashes.

Brodie (whose writing name is John Guthrie) was immensely impressed. He had no idea what a lot of trouble he was going to cause by imagining a Maori battle of 100 years ago. Then he met Laya Raki, the Javanese-Dutch dancer who plays the part of Moana, the wife of Maori chieftain Hongi Tepe, in the book. "A pretty little thing," he thought her, but you could see he was a bit shaken. It is all very well dreaming up an historical character from a flat in Notting Hill Gate, where Brodie wrote *The Seekers* two years ago, it is another to see the girl come to life the way a film producer sees her.

Authors have no say

But authors do not matter much, once the film-makers move in. Writers must like what the film men do, or lump it. Brodie says he has been immensely lucky compared with some authors. Every other character in *The Seekers* is preserved as he wrote them and, he emphasises, Moana is a compromise solution only because no Maori girl was prepared to play the part of the old-time chieftain's young wife who behaved with an uninhibited ardor by no means approved by Maori girls of today.

Film producer George Brown flew to New Zealand, interviewed 400 Maori girls for the part last July before he gave up his quest. "They were far too reticent, dignified and shy to do justice to the role," Brown said in London recently. "But we are keeping to the serious historical spirit of the book in every other detail."

With 50 or 60 Maori students and teachers, now in England, hired as extras, the accuracy of *The Seekers* probably sets a new record standard for the box-office film. The Maoris are enthusiastic about the care taken by producer Brown and director Ken Annakin. When the film is completed—most of the outdoor action has just been shot in New Zealand — it will be the most valuable single contribution to New Zealand publicity in the Dominion's history. Author Brodie will get even greater pleasure from this than the satisfaction he is getting from his own success. 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 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.

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 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. This early work is a first novel anyone might be proud of writing, its main fault merely an overcrowding of characters. This is understandable when it is realised Brodie did not think he would live much longer when he wrote the book. There is a lot for a young man to say when he feels he may never have another chance to express himself.

Brodie (pen name, John Guthrie) and wife Elinor in their London flat. He writes his stories in an exercise book, then types them.

But 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.

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 RAF 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 RAF 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 tells two stories about his RAF career and they are typical of his stories about himself.

A deflated entrance

His first recalls the day he was called before a RAF medical board which wanted to see if he was "mobile" enough to join the service. "I practised bowling into a room at top speed before the big day," Brodie says, "and had it pretty well taped. When the real performance came, I shot in like a bullet, sat down and beamed at the board. That ought to hold them, I thought. But the first thing I heard was one old boy saying he supposed I could move a lot faster if I wanted to. So I said yes, of course, and there was no more trouble at all."

The second story is about his visit, with a small nephew, to a village shop in Dorset, when Brodie, in the uniform of a RAF officer, was on leave during the war. The man behind the counter was a fatherly old gentleman, obviously anxious to be friendly.

"War injury, sir?" he asked, sympathetically.

"No, I'm afraid not," said Brodie.

"Oh," said the old boy, disappointed. "Your little boy, sir?"

"Well, no," said Brodie.

The shopkeeper tried again, ("gallantly refusing to let me disappoint him", Brodie says). "What part of England are you from?"

"Actually, I'm not English, I . . ." The man

Checking the movie sets for his book, The Seekers, at Pinewood Studios (England), John Brodie (talking to actress Laya Raki) was astonished at the authenticity of the Maori atmosphere.

Important people in The Seekers. From left; Laya Raki (as Maori chief's wife); Brodie; actor Jack Hawkins; producer George Brown.

Tribal chief Hongi Tepe is played by Maori bass singer Inia Te Wiata who happened to be in London when the film was being cast.

behind the counter turned away disgusted, convinced that the man he thought was one of the First of the Few, a father and an English gentleman, was a shabby impostor. No one enjoyed the irony of the situation more than Brodie.

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 postwar novels have each had a different setting, style and attitude. *Journey By Twilight* is the story of a neurotic RAF 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 hometown and has been described by leading literary critic Marghanita Laski as "a minor classic", and *The Seekers* has hit the Rank Empire jackpot.

Dignity of the Maori people

A tough, gusty narrative, full of action and color, it was written to attract the attention of film producers. It also includes a thoughtful and sensitive appreciation of the nobility and dignity of the Maori people—an attitude which is not in the film script but is embodied in the treatment of the native sequences in the film.

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 neighbors 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 neighbor 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.

Works without fuss

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.

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 is now 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 all 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.*

Money rewards not great

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 honor—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. #