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VALE, JOHN BRODIE

The death at the early age of 50 of Mr. John Brodie, better known to a world-wide audience as the novelist, John Guthrie, while returning to England from his first visit to his homeland since before the war, is a grave blow to New Zealand letters and a personal loss to the many Taranaki people who have known him since boyhood. The memory of his friendly, natural manner is still fresh in the minds of the many people who were fortunate enough to meet him last December and January. Beginning his writing career as a journalist on the Taranaki Daily News, John Brodie later achieved considerable success in London as a journalist, literary critic and editor, but it is upon his novels that his claim to enduring fame rests.

New Zealand writers of the first rank are so few that the loss of one of the most prominent, while at the height of his literary powers, is a grievous blow indeed. Like Katherine Mansfield before him and Dan Davin today, John Brodie was constrained, in the interests of his craft, to make his home outside New Zealand. But in doing so he never became the complete expatriate. Indeed, for all his best books he returned to New Zealand for a setting, and, as often as not, to New Plymouth, a city he loved and understood.

"The Little Country," the first novel which brought him a modest success, "So They Began," the exquisite "The Man in Our Lives," a biographical sketch which he rightly reckoned his best work, and "Paradise Bay" all dealt with the New Plymouth of his boyhood, and each in its own way was an accurate cameo of small town life in the early 1930's. Though from the distance of 12,000 miles and 20 years he now and then poked gentle fun at the self-important aspects of small town life, there was never any question of his affection for his birth-

place, nor any malice in his thrusts.

John Brodie did not win success overnight. Indeed, he had obstacles to overcome that would have daunted many men. At school, in the spacious days of Mr. W. H. Moyes, he was an outstanding athlete at a time when New Plymouth Boys' High School Rugby teams were a by-word in the land. He continued his Rugby career at university, toured Australia with a New Zealand University team and was nominated for a Rhodes Scholarship. Soon afterwards his athletic career was terminated when, following an injury he had one of his legs amputated. Despite this physical handicap, John Brodie, homeward bound from England when war broke out, turned back to Britain, joined the Royal Air Force and served with distinction as an expert on night fighter tactics. Meanwhile his writing matured and, when the war ended, new works continued to appear from his pen at the rate of one every 18 months.

The last, and undoubtedly the most spectacular, was "The Seekers," which became better known than any of his other works through the film of it which the Rank Organisation made in New Zealand. At his death, John Brodie had earned a niche for himself, if not among the immortals or even among the best-sellers, certainly among the novelists that matter. Certain of his works must hold an honoured place among the pitifully few memorable New Zealand novels. But for many people the death of the author will seem of little importance beside the loss of a friend. Whatever verdict history ultimately passes on his creations, Taranaki today mourns a true son of its lush acres who never for a moment forgot in his hour of success the debt he owed to the friends of his youth and to the city and province which nurtured him.