

Review Article

Clio and the Parish Pump Recent Books on New Zealand Local History

The Auckland Journals of Vicesimus Lush 1850-1863. Edited by Alison Drummond. Pegasus, Christchurch, 1971. 279 pp. N.Z. price: \$7. *The Coming of the Pakeha to the Auckland Province.* By John Horsman. Hicks Smith & Sons, Wellington, 1971. x, 231 pp. N.Z. price: \$4.95. *The Lively Capital.* By Una Platts. Avon Fine Prints, Christchurch, 1971. 211 pp. N.Z. price: \$12. *Challenge and Response. A Study of the Development of the Gisborne East Coast Region.* By W. H. Oliver and Jane M. Thomson. For the East Coast Development Research Association, Gisborne, 1971. 251 pp. N.Z. price: \$4.50.

I CLEARLY recall the remark made by my lecturer in history, Willis Airey, some twenty-five years ago to a group of M.A. students who were discussing possible thesis topics. He dismissed regional research as 'overconcerned with small beer and skittles', tolerable only as the last resort of a teacher with an M.A. to complete, but trapped in a country town far from national archival resources where, one assumed, serious historical research, properly so-called, could begin. Since Airey's conception of history was proverbially generous, one could sense the general low regard in which academics then held local history. The term 'local history' in New Zealand at that time I suppose usually reduced itself to one of two things. It could refer to the hobby of enthusiastic antiquarians. Or it meant *the* Local History, the commemorative publication of one's district, full of lists of early settlers, and road board minutes reproduced verbatim; but a very solemn book the reading of which was a kind of devotional exercise, like looking upon the 1914-18 war memorial. One pondered past glories, then, presumably, resolved to carry on better than before.

But over the last generation the writing of local history has become respectable in New Zealand. There is no doubt as to the scholarly standards of the two commissioned South Island provincial histories, A. H. McLintock's *History of Otago* and the recently completed three-volume *History of Canterbury*; or, at the more confined regional level, of W. G. Gardner's *The Amuri*, Ruth M. Allan's *Nelson* or Philip May's *The West Coast Gold*

*Rushes*¹ (though it must be admitted that rarely have our local historians shown the flair demonstrated in the best writing of a similar kind across the Tasman).² Clearly it is no longer possible to brush aside local history as some amateur expression of community piety. Each town, region, province is, to a varying degree, a microcosm with points of similarity and dissimilarity to the national pattern, which, accurately discerned, can refine our view of the New Zealand experience. The writing of such history no longer requires defence on academic grounds.

Nevertheless, if sheer bulk of publication be our yardstick, local history in New Zealand is still the preserve of the antiquarian and the self-taught researcher rather than of the professional historian. Year after year the tide of popular town and district histories rolls on. I propose to look at a selection of three of the best such books written about Auckland brought out in 1971, placing beside them in contrast Professor W. H. Oliver's recently published regional history of the East Coast. This I hope will provide a basis for some suggestions about the kind of questions historians should be asking of regional history in order to get a better understanding of the general processes of historical change in New Zealand.

In *The Auckland Journals of Vicesimus Lush 1850-63*, Alison Drummond provides us with excerpts from the journal-letters sent to England by one of the earnest young clerks-in-holy-orders attracted by Bishop Selwyn to serve in his new colonial diocese. Shortly after arrival Lush was appointed to the cure of souls of Howick, a parish almost entirely made up of imperial army pensioners and their families. Howick was one of the four Fencible settlements, garrison towns established after Heke's War on the southern perimeter of the main Auckland settlement as protection from attack. The journals have much of interest whether they describe life at Bishop's Auckland (St John's College, Tamaki) and in the impecunious Howick parish, or tell of the disorder and alarm south of Auckland in the opening months of the Waikato campaign. We already know that the life of New Zealand's first bishop was no bed of roses: exhausting travel and recalcitrant old missionary hands ensured that. The journals also show, what is less well-known, that Selwyn had a difficult diocesan team to drive. J. R. Churton, the incumbent of St Paul's, the city's first parish church, was chronically insubordinate, while even the new men Selwyn appointed — Lush, A. G. Purchas and others — could be wilful, and lacking in the spirit of whole-heartedness which the bishop, perhaps unrealistically, expected of all his clergy. Over the years the loud trumpet note in praise of Selwyn which Lush sounded so strongly in the first pages of the journal

¹ A. H. McLintock, *The History of Otago*, Dunedin, 1949; N. C. Phillips, David Macmillan and W. J. Gardner, eds., *A History of Canterbury*, Vol. I, C. R. Straubel, L. C. Webb and G. Jobberns, 1957, Vol. III, W. H. Scotter, 1965, and Vol. II, G. C. Hensley, W. H. Scotter and others, 1971; W. G. Gardner, *The Amuri; A County History*, Culverden, 1956; Ruth M. Allan and others, *Nelson; A History of Early Settlement*, Wellington, 1965; Philip Ross May, *The West Coast Gold Rushes*, 2nd rev. ed., Christchurch, 1967.

² See, e.g., Margaret Kiddle, *Men of Yesterday; A Social History of the Western District of Victoria 1834-1890*, Melbourne, 1961; Weston Bate, *A History of Brighton*, Melbourne, 1962; and Geoffrey Serle, *The Rush to be Rich*, Melbourne, 1971.

became increasingly muted, and especially so in the early 1860s, as Lush began to reflect the views of a military, pakeha-centred parish in whose eyes Selwyn had become unacceptably philo-Maori. Yet Lush never succumbed to race-hatred. When in 1863 South Auckland was under siege he wrote of 'rebel' Maoris with sympathy and sometimes respect, and reserved his harshest denunciation for European soldiers and levies who looted the homes and habitations of European and Maori alike.

For all this, I am not convinced that the Lush journals were best used in the form they appear, that is as documents telling their own story. Editorial comment is relatively brief: there is a ten-page introductory chapter, some footnoting concerned with terse biographical material, and a twelve-page appendix with somewhat more extended biographical and historical comment. Since this material is accurate and the editor's historical observations are on the whole sensible and shrewd one is left wondering whether, given the limited importance of Lush the man and the repetitious nature of much of the journals, Mrs Drummond might have better served her readership by writing an interpretative account of Lush and his times in which she combined information culled from the journals with other documentary material.

John Horsman's *The Coming of the Pakeha to the Auckland Province*, which traces the development of European settlement in the province up to the present day, is substantially a published version of a thesis written in 1948. Except in the final section of the book the thesis has been little revised either in the light of more demanding conceptions of the nature of local history today, or in order to incorporate material from more recent theses on the Auckland province — those of H. J. Hanham, H. J. Whitwell and M. N. Pearson to name but a few. Horsman's account still rests rather much on commemorative local histories and works of ancestral piety whose worshipful tone the author often finds contagious. The most significant trend in nineteenth-century Auckland settlement — the high proportion of the provincial population absorbed by Auckland city itself — is scarcely investigated. Accordingly, our typical settler remains, misleadingly, a horny-handed son of toil carving home and farm out of the virgin bush. But there is much to satisfy the general reader for whom the book is intended; an interesting story is told of the beginnings of Puhoi, Waipu, the Albertland settlements and the Thames.

In *The Lively Capital* Una Platts has written an individual and highly entertaining account of the period of twenty-five years during which Auckland was capital of New Zealand. Her declared aim is to 'give something of the flavour of life during that time'. And in certain senses she has done this very well. The lavish illustrations, handsomely reproduced, carefully annotated and blended with the text provide the panache of this book. But those who expect solid analytical meat will be sent empty away; though I admit FitzRoy gets his due and Selwyn comes through convincingly. In short, the book is a narrative account which unfolds with a mysterious logic of its own, borne along by extended citation of memoirs, published and unpublished. The view of the past presented is that of the literate, the articulate, the privileged: officials, missionaries, army officers and merchants; and their gossiping wives. This is a kind of 'history from above'.

It ignores the lower orders — the New Zealand equivalent of G. K. Chesterton's 'Secret People of England, that has never spoken yet'. The Auckland we learn about is, in Una Platt's phraseology, one of 'frivolous gaieties' — parties, levées, balls, marriages, 'pic nics', race-meetings and so on; the view of capital through the eyes of the 'quality', as it pleased the upper crust to label itself. So there is much about petty patronage, who is pecking whom in Government House, scandalous liaisons, wilful clergy and disobedient servants. Academics will blench at the relative emphasis the author puts on her material, for the menu of a formal dinner or the results of a race-meeting may get more extended treatment than the financial problems of Governor FitzRoy or the circumstances behind the shift of the capital to Wellington. In a word, Miss Platts is an unrepentant antiquarian. But of the very best kind. Her ratiocination in determining exactly where each of her notables lived is in the Sherlock Holmes league, and her freedom from factual error and skill in telling her story will shame more pretentious historians who will be thankfully quarrying her book for years to come.

W. H. Oliver and Jane Thomson's *Challenge and Responses A Study of the Development of the Gisborne East Coast Region* must rate as the most significant historical study of a North Island region for many years. (The attribution of joint authorship to Miss Thomson was a generous recognition by Professor Oliver of an able research assistant, but his interpretative brand is so indelibly on the pages that I speak of the book henceforth as being his.)

Professor Oliver begins with those circumstances which in conjunction have made the East Coast one of the most distinctive regions in New Zealand. He speaks of remoteness, indifferent internal communications, a racial mix with a large and vigorous Maori component, population growth urban and rural, uncharacteristically slow for the North Island and restricted economic opportunities that have led to the region being on balance an exporter of its young. The essence of the book is encased in the observation, 'To live in Gisborne is, at many levels, to accept limitations' (p. 234). Yet the author has resisted the temptation to concentrate on the uniqueness of the East Coast. The region is placed within a national framework; its distinctiveness is seen as 'a set of variations upon a New Zealand theme' giving a 'characteristic colour and shape' to 'the common stuff' of the national history (pp. 10-11).

Part I of the book — 'Maori and Pakeha' — deals with the interaction of the two contrasting cultures up to the race-wars of the 1860s. The outcome was a progressive adaptation by the Maoris on terms much their own, as mission Christianity, education, new concepts of law and order, and farming practices were woven into the texture of traditional Maori society. Yet, changing the metaphor, though the Maori did not break under the impact of culture contact, he had to bend a long way. Which way to bend was the question, because, as relations with Europeans worsened, Maori leaders were divided as to where self-interest lay. Should they be neutral, loyalist, or throw in their lot with insurgent Maoridom? Agreement did not come. So the race wars of the 1860s became on the East Coast, especially after Hauhaism had taken root, a complex inter-tribal conflict

in which 'loyalists' like Ropata, encouraged by settlers and politicians determined to have a showdown, fought against Maori 'rebels'. As we see in Part II of the book, which covers approximately the last thirty years of the century, loyalism had its wage. Unlike tribes elsewhere in the island, the Ngati Porou were spared large-scale confiscation and exposure to heavy settler and government land-buying pressure (p. 89).

Clearly Professor Oliver is no romantic on the subject of race relations. He reminds us, and rightly, of what it has become fashionable to forget, that in the process of buying Maori land the 'capacity for greed, sharp practice and duplicity,' was to be found in 'men of both races' (p. 102). But for all his realism, he is less convincing when he deals with the great period of land alienation from about 1870 to the mid-1890s. Admittedly the subject is unusually difficult. Because procedures for buying Maori lands in those years were subject to frequent statutory changes, they became enormously complicated. And especially was this so on the East Coast where the legal tangle was further knotted by the operations of the New Zealand Native Lands Settlement Company, an association of European capitalists, and Maori owners who for their shares contributed not money but blocks of land. The need to unravel such tangles led to an inflow of lawyers who enthusiastically converted the region, for a time, into the most litigious part of New Zealand.

As more land moved into pakeha hands the East Coast became what Professor Oliver calls a 'second stage frontier', settled by migrants from elsewhere in the colony, with Hawkes Bay often acting as a main staging point (pp. 103-4). Race relations remained generally easy, though each community had its stereotype of the other. For Europeans this was a period of closer settlement when farm assets were built up — buildings, pastures, flocks, fences laying the foundation of what was the most promising period in the history of Poverty Bay: the early twentieth century.

The new century brings us to the third and final part of the book, 'The Nationalisation of Regional Life'. Though there is no great evidence of fundamental research here, a convincing broad sketch of trends is given. Until the early 1920s, the region benefited from rising prices and shared in New Zealand's prosperity, its economy merging at several points with the national pattern. But, despite this apparent progress, it never quite lost its isolation nor shuffled off its problems. The account tells of uncompleted rail routes, of a stagnating narrow-based economy, of a region where, significantly, the depression of the 1930s bit first. Difficulties still remain today. Over the last half-century growth in population and secondary industry has rarely been at the pace of the country overall. And, more ominously for a basically agricultural region, the animal population has grown little whereas that of the more dynamic North Island areas has bounded ahead. It is not surprising that the modern mood of the East Coast combines a deep and abiding sense of identity with a nagging unease about future prospects.

Challenge and Response must henceforth serve as a model for young New Zealand local historians who would avoid the besetting sin of non-professional historians operating in their field; in Sean Glynn's words, failure 'to raise meaningful general questions' and thereby to 'relate the

parish pump to the cosmos'.³ Professor Oliver sets an example by his refusal to take the narrower view and to dwell on the particularity of his region which he places so firmly in the broader framework of national developments.

Nevertheless the shortcomings of the book, which arise rather from its interpretations than from its basic conception, must be recognised. The account is highly selective, with arbitrary emphases and exclusions. The Te Kooti 'epic', for example, is passed over as an 'epilogue' to the 'crucial struggle' which we are told was virtually ended by 1865 (p. 94). Perhaps Professor Oliver is justified here, and elsewhere. But he works under a tremendous handicap in convincing us, for he has no bibliography and no footnotes, an omission one suspects not of his choosing. Inevitably this weakens the kind of broad-ranging exposition to which he seems increasingly drawn with the author formulating as he goes along bold generalisations and sometimes provocative speculations.⁴ Oliver asks us to trust him assuring us that a scholarly apparatus, though unseen, supports the work.⁵ But for all the verve with which the counsel draws upon his uncorroborated evidence, he can scarcely complain if the readers, as jurymen, settle for a verdict of 'not proven'.

One can illustrate the problems from chapters xi and xii which deal with the complex interaction of Maori land buying, politics and business. Oliver says of the laws passed in the 1862-90 period, which established and developed the Native Land Court system, that 'it is perhaps too easy to judge this legislation harshly, for the lawmakers were pulled in several ways', and that they wanted, among other things, 'to give the Maori fair treatment, or at least appear to do so' (p. 100). This is excessive indulgence, at least towards that tight-knit lobby drawn from both chambers of the General Assembly and representing all shades of political opinion which, given the lack of disciplined parties, could press for the speeding up of the process of land sales or draw the teeth of any bill which sought to safeguard Maori rights of ownership. Or again, it is suggested that the movement of Ngati Porou lands through the Land Courts was, in general, an 'amiable process' with 'little evidence of the demoralisation that accompanied Court attendance elsewhere in New Zealand' (pp. 107-8). This may well be, but it contrasts so vividly with the experience of other North Island centres of land buying that citation of authority is essential to establish the point.

Professor Oliver reserves his greatest severity for Greyite 'Liberals' such as Dr Lautour and the two scapegrace lawyer politicians, W. L. Rees and John Sheehan. From the politico-business activities of men of this stripe he seeks to establish a fresh interpretation of nineteenth-century politics. Of the vendetta between the Repudiationists and the private Maori land buyers, he says that if Sheehan and Rees both of whom 'had interests in Maori lands' should 'prove to be typical, then we shall clearly not be dealing with pure-minded crusaders against the runholders' (p. 135). In fact the evidence

³ Sean Glynn, *Urbanisation in Australian History, 1788-1900*, Melbourne, 1970, p. 24.

⁴ See, as an earlier instance of this, Oliver's article, 'Reeves, Sinclair and the Social Pattern' in *The Feel of Truth*, ed. P. Munz, Wellington, 1969.

⁵ Oliver, *Challenge and Response*, Preface, p. 1.

presented in the book proves nothing one way or the other about the sincerity of these men on the Repudiation issue. They were certainly not, as Professor Oliver speculates, members of an 'insurgent capitalist group' (p. 136). They were notoriously impecunious; lands registry records suggest that neither bought on his own behalf much Maori land at all. Indeed both had so little capital that they were financially embarrassed when, defeated in elections, they lost their allowances as M.H.R.s.⁶ In short they were not 'typical' Liberals but typical lawyers in search of a fee. Moreover, it was virtually impossible for a North Island lawyer — be he the Greyite Sheehan, or Sheehan's Hallite partner F. A. Whitaker (Frederick's son) — not to be involved in the process of Maori land buying, regardless of his political views on Repudiation, or free sales, or Crown pre-emption.

Nor are the political inferences drawn by Professor Oliver from the quarrels between Europeans over the buying of East Coast lands convincing. Central to his argument are the affairs of the New Zealand Native Lands Settlement Company. Far from being a concern towards which the Greyites were sympathetic (p. 128), its board by 1883 was loaded with the supporters⁷ of the very politicians (the 'old guard' Professor Oliver calls them), who he suggests were bent on killing the scheme when it came up for parliamentary sanction. Certainly much more detailed research will have to be done before such bold generalizations on the interaction of politics and business (pp. 133-6), or on the politics of the 1880s as a struggle between 'ins' and 'outs' (p. 136), or on the motives of champions of freehold tenure in the early twentieth century (pp. 213-5), can be firmly established.

Having entered my caveats about some of the historical judgments of *Challenge and Response*, I hasten to nominate it as a model to all inexperienced, would-be New Zealand regional historians. One regrets that no comparable guide can be recommended for New Zealand urban history on which little of substance has been written. This gap is somewhat surprising because, in spite of the myth to the contrary, large numbers of New Zealanders have been town-dwellers since colonial days. Those in search of suggestions therefore about sources and techniques to use in order to uncover influences at work in urban growth — transport, the provision of social amenities, the work of real estate developers and speculative builders, and so on — must turn elsewhere, perhaps to examples drawn from British urban history. H. J. Dyos's superb case-study of part of South London, *Victoria Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell*,⁸ deals with processes of urban development by no means remote from the Dunedin or Auckland experience. Following the lead of these historians abroad, moreover, we should be prepared to break away from what has been described as the 'biographical treatment of the life history of a particular town viewed

⁶ See *Thames Advertiser*, Thames, 3 December 1881, p. 3, col. 7; and the Hall Papers, XXXVII, General Assembly Library, Wellington, where Fox in a letter to John Hall, (24 September 1879) observes as a self-evident truth that 'everybody knows that Sheehan has no money of his own'.

⁷ Thomas Russell, J. B. Whyte, Patrick Comiskey, Daniel Pollen, J. C. Firth and T. Morrin.

⁸ H. J. Dyos, *Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell*, Leicester, 1961.

largely in isolation',⁹ for, as Dyos (citing Joan Thirsk) has pointed out, no abiding impression can be held of a town without comparing it with others.¹⁰ Parallel studies and comparisons of towns and regions, for example, have given a satisfying explanation of the variegated pattern and besetting disunity of Chartism,¹¹ and added to the understanding of the complex nature of the grass-roots support of the British Liberal Party in mid-Victorian times.¹² Studies at some depth of our main urban centres could put to the test folk traditions such as the stubborn belief that Dunedin capital controlled much Auckland business before the First World War, or, more trivially, that the social composition of the various settlements has led to pronounced differences in the character of our cities; Auckland, allegedly, is brash, Christchurch staid, and so on. Moreover it is amazing how little we really know about life-styles in New Zealand in the nineteenth century; about the quality of existence in the poorer areas of colonial towns, and about the leisure, recreational and cultural activities of the community as a whole. Frederic Harrison is reputed to have complained in 1887 of the tendency of European travellers to make places abroad to which they went as far as possible a replica of places at 'home'.¹³ My own research into Auckland and that of my students tend to support this view, but it would be interesting to see if this tentative conclusion were supported by evidence drawn from local studies elsewhere.

Here is a selection from what could be a lengthy list of questions concerned with pre-1914 New Zealand developments to which I believe research in local history will in time give answers.

How was money capital won from gold fields invested?

How was nineteenth century industry organised and financed?

How real were land hunger and land monopoly in the 1880s?

What occupational groups were settled on the land as a result of Liberal land legislation?

What motives really underlay settler distaste for lease-in-perpetuity?

Under what circumstances did town and country antagonism (one of the most consistent divisions in New Zealand society) appear?

Is it valid to interpret late nineteenth century social and political tensions in terms of class?¹⁴

Among what groups was formal religion important in the colonial settlements?

How did suburban migration take place in New Zealand cities, and did it represent a geographical separation of classes?

Why did the typical New Zealand home become an owner-occupied rather than a tenanted one?

⁹ Social Science Research Council, *Research in Economic and Social History*, London, 1971, section on 'Urban History', p. 52.

¹⁰ H. J. Dyos, ed., *The Study of Urban History*, London, 1968, chapter 1 ('Agenda for Urban Historians'), p. 8.

¹¹ Asa Briggs, ed., *Chartist Studies*, London, 1959.

¹² John Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party 1857-1868*, London, 1966.

¹³ Asa Briggs in his lecture 'The Sense of Place', *The Quality of Man's Environment*, published by Voice of America, n.d., p. 86.

¹⁴ Oliver in *The Feel of Truth*, p. 168, implies the answer should be 'no'.

If many of the questions I have asked seem preoccupied with social (especially urban) developments of the nineteenth century, this merely reflects my own tastes and research interests. The twentieth century probably lends itself even better to the kind of enquiry I have been talking of. I am equally sure that some sort of microcosmic investigation will provide valuable answers to questions on race relations, party-political developments,¹⁵ the organisation of agriculture, the development of welfare and related topics.

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¹⁵ Several M.A. theses of high quality employing psephological techniques have been written under the supervision of Robert Chapman of Auckland, e.g. B. D. Graham's 'Waikato Politics', 1954. Students under the supervision of W. J. Gardner of the University of Canterbury have also produced a fine crop of nineteenth century Canterbury election studies, e.g. A. M. Evans, 'A Study of Canterbury Politics in the Early 1880's', 1959.

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