

Reviews

Sir Harry Atkinson 1831-1892. By Judith Bassett. Auckland University Press and Oxford University Press, 1975. xii, 196 pp. N.Z. price: \$9.15.

THIS work is a most welcome and valuable addition to the unfortunately very small range of biographies of prominent New Zealand politicians. It sets a high standard of painstaking research and penetrating and realistic political analysis. It looks a modest work, but the unpretentious straightforwardness of Ms Bassett's presentation is in itself a testimony to the quality of her achievement. In the first place, she has had to act very much as a pioneer not merely in discovering and setting out the facts of Atkinson's political career but also in unravelling the complexities of the politics of the period. That she moves so effortlessly through these and seems so lucidly to place Atkinson in his political context should not lead us to overlook the immense amount of work which must have gone into this aspect of the exercise. Secondly, one feels that the scale of the book and the style in which Atkinson's career is described for us are just right. He was not an exciting or glamorous politician, and there would have been no point in trying to pretend that he was or in over-dramatizing the events of a political life which saw very little practical political achievement and little of substance by which New Zealanders now remember him. During the 'depression years' of 1876-1890 New Zealanders kept on coming back to Atkinson for political leadership, not because they felt any great liking for him nor in any hope that his style of politics would relieve their depressed condition, but because the 'bold' men, the men who did advocate heroic solutions or promise to work miracles, came unstuck. Atkinson could be relied on not to try to be a hero nor a financial wizard. In this respect the style of Ms Bassett's book exactly mirrors the style of the man — and the style of the politics of an age which had to have him as its major political leader.

Atkinson reflected his age but he did not transcend it. His career is an excellent illustration of the thesis that the achievement of political prominence by a particular politician is to be explained by the existence of a close correlation or 'fit' between his own personality and the political psychology of the age. Again and again Ms Bassett emphasizes a relationship between Atkinson's temperament, oscillating between extremes of activity and paralysis, of optimism and depression, and the political mood of the country, swinging from 'boldness' to caution and back again. One feels that in trying to achieve a balance between optimism and caution and to follow what Ms Bassett calls a 'middle-of-the-road' course he was struggling to achieve a mastery over the conflicting tendencies within himself and that in so doing he happened to dramatize and represent the major political confusions of his age. The typical Atkinsonian sentence or political statement had a balanced construction, for example, warning against

both 'undue haste' and 'undue caution'. Always there is the search for equilibrium, and always there is the inability to achieve it.

1890 had become accepted as one of those dates which mark great turning-points in our history. An historiographical tradition born in the Liberal era and cemented by W. Pember Reeves had established a sharp division between the politics of the 1880s and the politics of the 1890s. Keith Sinclair's fine biography of Reeves had stood alone and dominated our understanding of the political trends of those decades. Now Ms Basset's biography of Atkinson provides a much needed counterweight. It should lead us to revise our views as to the 'newness' of the Liberal era and to the extent of the discontinuity with the pre-1890 period on which the rhetoric of the Liberal politicians, seeking to blacken their 'conservative' opponents, laid so much stress. For it is remarkable how many of the ingredients of the Liberalism of the 1890s can be found in Atkinson's political thinking. He reflected his age and its uncertainties all too faithfully, and that meant, of course, that in his politics we can detect also the presence of those viewpoints which were to become predominant during the next decade. His financing, with its emphasis on 'self-reliance', caution, and orthodoxy, was little different from that practised by the Liberals. More than twenty years before Ward's Liberal government made the idea official policy, Atkinson was proposing the use of land as a national endowment, with rents from leaseholds being used to pay orphans' and widows' benefits. His attitude to the role of the State in New Zealand, with its rejection of the doctrinaire laissez-faire philosophy and its emphasis on looking at how, in practice, New Zealanders had used the power of government, was very similar to that of the Liberals, and in him, too, we find clearly expressed the same determination to avoid the development in New Zealand of the social evils of the 'Old World'. What were 'fads' for Atkinson in the 1880s became the political orthodoxy of the 1890s. In some respects he went even beyond the Liberals. His national insurance proposals remind one more of the superannuation scheme of the Labour government of 1972-75 than of anything done or even proposed by the Liberals, who remained obsessed with the notion that land reform was the key to the solution of all New Zealand's social problems.

Why, then, if Atkinson already possessed many reforming instincts and attitudes, was it not he, but the Liberal leaders who followed him, who turned them into solid legislative achievement? Ms Bassett has no doubt of the answer. He was entirely lacking in an ability to communicate to others his sense of the urgency of dealing with New Zealand's social problems. He did not even know how to go about doing so, how to arouse popular enthusiasm for the remedies which he knew would have to be tried. In 1887 he said: 'I am proud of being an Englishman as well as a New-Zealander — but, if I had to choose between the two, I should choose to be an Englishman rather than a New-Zealander.' Thus he lacked any sympathy for the strong current of New Zealand national feeling which was to be so important an ingredient in the support which the New Zealand people gave to the Liberal government. Atkinson was a paternalist, not a democrat. Although he anticipated many of the Liberal policy positions, he failed to establish any effective political relationship with the people and so his insights received no practical expression and his career disintegrated into bleakness and sterility.

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