

Reviews

Looking Back: A Photographic History of New Zealand. By Keith Sinclair and Wendy Harrex. Oxford University Press, Wellington, 1978. 240pp. N.Z. price: \$16.85.

IN *Looking Back* Sinclair and Harrex have given us a superb collection of photographs and captions to illustrate the themes around which the text has been organized. The relationship between text, captions, and illustrations is not close. The photographs and their finely etched captions are used like elaborate footnotes. The photograph constitutes a source; it has been taken for a reason. It may distort by selectivity, yet it constitutes a fragment of meaning, a clue to times past. In juxtaposition to the text the photographs in *Looking Back* illustrate men and women from the past, some of them well-known, and many of their day-to-day activities. They are revealing, although the text does not draw out their meaning. There are omissions. Te Whiti does not appear, for instance, although the Otakau Marae has a photographic portrait. And large themes, such as war and sport, are completely ignored.

For the professional historian the text holds few surprises. Sinclair gives the impression that he has written most of these essays standing, as it were, upon his head. Some of the chapters, such as 'People' and 'Town Life', reflect new interests among historians but others, notably 'Politics and Politicians', are somewhat stale. The space given to the text may have cramped Sinclair too much, or, possibly, he found the photographic footnotes more interesting than the text. Nor does the text make full use of the photographs. In the essay on 'Class', a series of reflections about income distribution and conflict, the photographs illustrate considerable distinctions in dress, yet little is made of the point. While the prose is often staccato the line of argument is always clear even when unconvincing. We are told, for instance, that fifty-six per cent of those settled on the land between 1890 and 1893 were workingmen 'who became small capitalists themselves'. Indeed! I would like to see the evidence. Yet the text is not directed at professional historians but at a larger audience. For this audience, judging by the sales, the book has succeeded. Although a professional historian may well complain that the text is slight the important point is that an historian of Sinclair's stature has willingly turned his hand to 'popular' history. This is a healthy sign. And if some larger themes have been ignored others, such as the immigrants, have been brought into greater prominence. All in all it is an interesting book, superbly illustrated.

ERIK OLSSSEN