

Correspondence

I WELCOME the severity of William Worger's critical review of *Te Puea* (NZJH, XIII, 1, 96-98) — not because I agree with his arguments (although his points about footnoting are taken) — but because they raise considerations about the kinds of history being written in New Zealand and about the questions to which historians could be addressing themselves.

Worger says the book's 'tendency to lapse into anecdotal narrative weakens the structure of much of the text'. And he speaks of a 'concentration on telling the story of Te Puea and . . . an apparent unwillingness to examine the social forces influencing her'.

First, let me be clear about what the book was intended to be: it was written as a biography with narrative structure directed primarily but not exclusively towards a general audience. It was 'how' history rather than 'why' history. It was *not* primarily a study of social and economic forces written for a peer group of historians. Worger asks 'what of the problems consequent on the transition from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist mode of production, of the continuing effects of proletarianization as the Pakeha farming frontier separated Maori from control over the means of production?' What indeed? There is a place for the discussion of such issues in such terms; I have views about them and have written of them elsewhere. But that place was not in a narrative biography. Worger is applying criteria for a different kind of historical study, one that is primarily a 'why' kind.

I attempted, however, to provide as much explanation as I felt necessary to make the narrative comprehensible, according to the knowledge I had at the time of writing. Worger is incorrect when he alleges 'little is said' about why Te Puea revived haka and action song. *Her* reasons are described on pp.118 and 119. *His* explanation — 'as a means of cementing group unity in the face of the disintegrative effects of capitalism and . . . as a cloak of orthodoxy to persuade the older people to accept her more innovative social and political policies' — is simply not correct. Neither in Te Puea's own writing about her motives nor in the opinions of those close to her at the time is there any indication that these were her motives. The point about cloaking innovation with traditional practices I raised later in the book because it did not become a factor until later in her life — after she had met Ngata and had had an opportunity to discuss goals and tactics with him. This criticism of Worger's arises from a misunderstanding of evidence.

I was also trying to emphasize the preoccupations of Maori informants, to highlight not only factors that were significant in terms of the conventions of biography, but also those that seemed important to Maori posterity. Maoris, after all, constituted part of my readership. Worger appears to have misunderstood this too. He refers to my attention to stature and appearance as an oddity. I was concerned about these things partly because my informants were (they were regarded as key ingredients of qualities such as rangatiratanga, mana and ihi); and partly because in the conventions of biography there is value in

depicting the appearance and characteristics of protagonists. This second point, which Worger appears not to accept, I regard as self-evident. The quotation he professed not to understand, that Te Puea had 'large, clear and slightly hooded eyes that suggested depths of knowledge on her side and an ability to enter other people's minds on the other', comes into this category. It is how people experienced her (Katipa, Poutapu, Mahuta, Jones, Acheson and Ramsden); it is an attempt to condense their descriptions of the effect of her appearance on them.

I found Worger's dismissal of Maori oral evidence as 'anecdotes', 'colourful oral material' and 'various stories' patronizing and somewhat offensive. It suggests that such evidence is little more than quaint embellishment of the real business of history-abstracted analysis from documentary evidence. I believe this view too is mistaken on two grounds: one, because such evidence may offer considerations not apparent from (in this case) Pakeha compiled documents; and two, because it enables the biographer in pursuit of 'how' history to place characters in the day-to-day context of events and relationships. This latter factor has literary advantages. It also sheds light on the kinds of factors that would interest the 'why' historian. How much more we could learn about Seddon, for example, if we had evidence of his public life and conduct of relationships outside the Legislature.

With regard to the literary considerations, I heard a historian say at an oral history seminar that he did not give a damn whether the batons that struck the heads of Depression rioters in 1932 went 'thwack' or 'thonk'. I suspect Worger shares this view when he speaks of 'a failure to distinguish between what is and what is not important.' The question is, important to whom?

In a study of the social and economic causes and consequences of the Depression, it matters little whether the sound was 'thwack' or 'thonk'. But in an attempt to tell narrative history, to provide characterization, to explore motivation, to evoke the texture of experience at certain heightened moments, then such a question is of great importance. So are details of the Te Puea story that Worger describes as 'lapses' into anecdotal narrative. Her trip to Rerenga Wairua before her death, for example, the events that took place and the things she said are not only of narrative interest — they are also far more revealing of her behaviour as a Maori (which Worger also dismisses) than statistics on Maori ancestry or population distribution could ever be. They are also of importance to the reader who seeks some glimmer of understanding of what it was like to live through certain situations. Historians who ignore such details entirely run the risk of professionalising themselves out of an audience, and perhaps out of a future.

None of the foregoing is intended to suggest that *Te Puea* is a study without flaw. I am sufficiently conscious of errors (such as that noted by Ruth Ross in the same issue of the *Journal*) to look forward to a second edition. But I make no apology for the book's shape and general approach to its subject.

MICHAEL KING

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