

Obituary

Ruth Ross 1920-82

NO NEW ZEALAND historian has worked harder to preserve visual evidence as well as written records than Ruth Ross (née Guscott). And no historian has lived 'closer to the original, autochthonous New Zealand soil'. Unlike others of her generation, Ruth was not tugged by European lifelines. Born and educated in Wanganui, she had been overseas in her girlhood and had no strong inclination to return. She studied European and American history and English literature at Victoria University College. New Zealand history was not then taught. When I first knew her she read Thackeray novels at breakfast but had begun to collect old New Zealand books.

She was a stunning person to live with and talk to and she concocted excellent curries. Her wide-ranging interests included law and cricket, the world of her first husband, George Burnard. She had given up the treadmill of full-time university studies to become a research assistant in the Centennial Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs. A perceptive and understanding person, she kept a watchful, motherly eye over me.

For a person of Ruth's temperament and intellect, the Centennial Branch proved a more congenial milieu than the university. Working relationships forged there continued in later life. Three parts of J.W. Heenan's centennial publications programme had been published—*Making New Zealand: Pictorial Surveys*; the *New Zealand Centennial Surveys* and the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*. The fourth—an historical atlas was under way. But the war depleted the staff and Ruth was soon the mainstay. She initiated me into atlas research some months later. As Eric McCormick has acknowledged, she was 'unsparing of her time, her knowledge, and her criticism' to all who foraged in her territory.

There was seldom a dull moment in the Historical Branch, as it was renamed when it became involved in wartime publicity and other publications. Sir Joseph Heenan kept his finger firmly on the pulse of the nation's cultural and political life. Ruth dramatized her research for a receptive audience.

Work habits formed there served her well in later years. She was tireless in her pursuit of new sources. She built up a network of correspondents all round the country, indeed the world. She set herself the most exacting standards and expected others to do the same. She thrived on argument. She cared about the use of words. She was feeling her way towards new methods and new approaches to New Zealand history. She read and admired Jim Davidson's thesis on 'European Penetration of the South Pacific'. She was interested in the work of anthropologists though she deplored their lack of historical knowledge and their jargon. She discovered a wealth of historical material in the old land claims and the Native Land Court. She familiarized herself with the people and places she was writing about. (Walks and picnics with Ruth and Ian years later invariably had an historical purpose). She was also beginning to realize that to write authentic New Zealand history you must look at all the evidence through both Maori and Euro-

pean eyes. *New Zealand's First Capital*, published by the Department in 1946, was a modest *tour de force* in these regards.

The Atlas survived the war but not the change of Government. Ruth meanwhile had been overwhelmed by early widowhood and moved to War History. She met and married Ian Ross and found a way back to happiness and family life. Ian took a pressure-cooker course in teaching and they moved to Auckland. But work in an inner city school and bringing up two sons in Takapuna in the fifties was a strain. Moreover, both were becoming increasingly concerned about Maori education and problems of urbanization. Ian joined the Maori School Service and they shifted north to Motukiore. Ruth's interest in the history of the region was revitalized. She wrote her two most original and imaginative pieces, *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* for School Publications and 'The Autochthonous New Zealand Soil' for *The Feel of Truth* edited by Peter Munz. Some of her atlas research was salvaged in school bulletins, also in *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* which contains her four Hokianga biographical entries and maps of early trade and settlement.

Her growing knowledge of the region's history was officially recognized by her appointment to the New Zealand Historic Places Trust and the Building Classifications Committee. She was working again with old colleagues. The Classification Committee's brief matched many of her interests. She was a keen gardener and propagated both a wide variety of Maori potatoes and old roses. She admired old colonial houses and Selwyn churches. On the Trust and in the Committee she battled every inch of the way for historical integrity in preservation and restoration and she insisted on accuracy to the smallest detail. Some of her failing energy in the last months of her life was expended in the collective fight to preserve the church of St. Mary's, Parnell, on its original site.

For almost ten years the Building Classification Committee travelled, five or six times in a year, recording and classifying nineteenth-century buildings and objects—some 3,000 of them by the time the whole country had been covered. Ruth's reading and research alone was a major contribution to this labour of love. She wrote *A Guide to Pompallier House* and *Clendon House Rawene* and her 'inestimable help' is also clearly visible in the *Guide to the Waimate Mission House*.

In her work on Pompallier House she was helped and encouraged by the Bishop of Auckland and the Marist Fathers. In return she helped them organize their archives and this developed into a substantial involvement in Father E. R. Simmon's research and publication on the Church. Later, her work in conservation at the Melanesian Mission Museum and research on the missionary diocese of Melanesia led to other commitments—lecturing to St. John's College students and reorganizing the property records of the Melanesian and the General Trust Board.

In between she enjoyed a three year fellowship in the History Department at the University of Auckland. Her 'Te Tiriti o Waitangi, texts and translations', a fine exercise in textual analysis, had won her recognition from academic historians. But the fellowship came too late for her to extract herself from Trust work and concentrate wholly on the study of Pompallier's Auckland she was hatching.

Her last and finest achievements were five chapters in the Trust's *Historic Buildings of New Zealand* edited by Frances Porter, particularly 'The Maori Church in Northland'. When I queried the amount of space devoted in this book

to Maori buildings, she replied that architecturally, they were 'the only truly indigenous contributions to the New Zealand scene today'. It did her heart good, she wrote, to know that the Trust, which hadn't reached its quarter century as a going concern, could bring out a book which was 'so demonstrably looking at New Zealand history with Maori and Pakeha eyes'. I should have known this without having to be told. It was typical of Ruth that she insisted on Maori consent and co-operation before she undertook this work.

She certainly excelled at what Sir Alister McIntosh once said were the kind of works the Trust should publish—'small scale works of real historical scholarship'. She was also a great *raconteuse* and letter-writer. Above all, her friends will remember her remarkable vitality, her courage, her integrity and her real concern for them.

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