

Jim Holt 1939-1983

AS HIS FRIENDS reflect on Jim's life and the inexplicable tragedy of his death, attempts are made to describe him. He was a kind, intelligent, equable, rational man; a man of integrity and good sense. All his life he was possessed by contagious enthusiasms. As a boy they included football, marbles, or Biggles books; later ingredients were jazz, economics, industrial relations, and the novels of Anthony Powell. Jim had a rare capacity for sharing in his friends' interests and he involved them in his. He had an extraordinarily diverse group of friends. All of them were enhanced by knowing Jim, and feel that their lives are diminished by his absence.

He was born into an intellectual environment. His father, Laurence Holt, was the first Professor of Accountancy at the University of Auckland. Betty Holt was active on the National Council of Women, the Consumer Council, the Auckland Hospital Board, and other organizations. Jim was a very verbal child. He relished conversation. But his background ensured that he would grow up a doer as well as a talker. Liberal opinions required positive action to support them. Jim could be relied upon to act. As early as 1959 the Princes Street branch of the Labour Party started to take shape in his room at the students' hostel of Auckland University.

In 1960, he took up a Frank Knox Memorial Fellowship at Harvard, where he graduated Ph.D. While there he sharpened his consciousness of what it was to be a New Zealander. In his thesis on the Republican insurgents he applied his New Zealand experience and his observation of how politics worked to the American party scene. Always underlying the sophisticated analysis of American politics was his question 'What makes America different?' Harvard published his book *Congressional Insurgents and the Party System, 1909-1916* in 1967. His research interest in American history persisted, and he wrote a number of articles on this subject. As his reputation grew he was invited to attend the 1976 Bicentennial Conference on American history in Japan. From January to June 1981 he taught at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where the students were surprised that a foreigner could know so much about their country.

Jim made his greatest contribution to American history as a teacher. He thought deeply about the purpose and structure of his courses. He was able to put events and people in their wider context and to make difficult subjects clear while retaining for the students a sense of their complexity. Postgraduate students sought him out as a supervisor. He was knowledgeable about research topics and sympathetic to students' problems of research and writing. In recent years particularly, Jim's students have produced a stream of impressive essays and theses.

In the later 1970s Jim's research interests turned to New Zealand. He began writing about the unique compulsory arbitration system in labour disputes. A dry topic, apparently, but warmed by Jim's sharp perceptions and his savouring of

human personalities, it glowed. Friends and colleagues listened warily at first, then with increasing fascination as Jim expounded different methods of calculating wage rates, or the sagas of the Tramways Drivers' Union, or the Jockeys' Strike of 1924. Two articles born of this research were published in this *Journal*, and he presented a paper at the first Conference of the New Zealand Historical Association in 1981. It became clear that Jim's work would significantly alter traditional views of industrial relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Much of his book has been written. It will be completed and published.

Jim's contribution to the university went beyond his teaching. He did not seek power, but he was always alive to the ins and outs of university politics and became a participant: Chairman of the Auckland branch of the Association of University Teachers, and a member of the Senate, he later served on the Appointments Committee, the Promotions Advisory Committee and the Academic Committee, besides being the review editor of the *New Zealand Journal of History* from 1976.

Jim was a natural academic and assiduous conference attender who had friends in every university he visited. He was regarded by many as the outstanding historian of his age group. His colleagues were surprised when he decided to apply for the job of Chief Historian in the Department of Internal Affairs. However, he thought it was time for a change in his life, and also that it was a good time to be leaving the University. In his farewell speech to the Department, he compared the University at his appointment in 1964—expanding, new jobs being created, student numbers growing, generally optimistic—with the University he was leaving—eroded by 3 per cent cuts, staff members resigning and not being replaced, middle-aged lassitude responding feebly to an atmosphere of impending crisis. But we were all pleased that he had won the job he wanted.

He was eager to go to Wellington. He thought we were becoming less serious in Auckland about the things he saw as important. Unlike most Aucklanders, he believed things *did* happen south of the Bombay Hills. He would say that you could meet as many writers and painters and actors as you liked in Auckland, but you couldn't get a decent discussion group going on economic policy. Jim relished the political atmosphere of Wellington. His friends in Parliament and throughout the 'head office' network were delighted to have him there, and immediately involved him in several projects. Both Jim and Jill enjoyed those five weeks very much until he died peacefully in his sleep on 24 July.

Jim Holt's life was tragically short yet it encompassed more solid achievements than many men attain in eight decades. We are grateful for that. But it was his warm human qualities as husband to Jill, father to Daniel and Rachel, and friend to many that he will be remembered most.

MICHAEL BASSETT
RAEWYN DALZIEL