

Reflections on the Writing of New Zealand History



THAT each generation writes its history anew is well known. Scholarship is shaped by the intellectual climate of its times. Changing circumstances lead historians to ask different questions of their sources or, indeed, to utilize new sources in their quest for a modified (most would say better) understanding of the past. Less widely appreciated beyond the ranks of professionals, perhaps, is the influence that an historian's predilections or training may have upon his interpretation of the historical record. Illustrations of both tendencies can be drawn from the writing of New Zealand history. For much of the nineteenth century, progress and the Englishness of New Zealand were the dominant themes in writing about the country; later W. P. Reeves wrote with the collectivist optimism of his time and his convictions; imperial sentiment was much in evidence between the two world wars; in the late 1950s the question of national identity came to the fore (in New Zealand as in the United States), with Keith Sinclair seeking its origins in the effect of the Pacific environment and W. H. Oliver emphasizing the strength of British inheritance upon developing New Zealand society. Now we have the introspective Oxford history which eschews generalities about a national 'ethos', and all but ignores events beyond these islands. Much of this is to the good. It is part of the process of understanding how the past came to be the present, and a reflection of the intellectual vitality of the subject. But if nothing else, history illustrates the need to weigh the causes and consequences of change, and such evaluation is as pertinent to the shaping as it is to the subject matter of the discipline.

Coming two decades, several dozen post-graduate theses, and countless articles after the survey histories of Sinclair and Oliver, the Oxford history is rich and welcome fare. According to its early reviewers, the volume is 'impressive and . . . courageous', 'indispensable', and evidence of 'a coming of age for historians'.¹ It continues to earn

¹ F. L. Wood, 'Inter-action packed history', *New Zealand Listener*, 6 June 1981; D. A. Hamer, 'Academic study a coming of age for historians', *New Zealand Times*, 14 June 1981.

deservedly favourable appraisals.² Despite the critics' inevitable quibbles, it is clear that an energetic empiricism and an inclination to understand 'the common man' have yielded a fresh and complex history. The distinctive orientation of the new view of New Zealand's past can be attributed to two major influences. One is the emphasis of much modern history upon the multi-faceted complexity of society 'in the round'. Whether quantitative or qualitative in approach, recent work in this area has focused upon such questions as economic stratification, social mobility, class, ethnic, and racial identities and interactions, and upon such issues as the place of women, the role of the family and the distribution of power within society. Seeking to illuminate the nature and structure — the inner workings — of societies, investigations of this type are almost always sectional in interest and local in scale. This has weakened the link between historical inquiry and the definition of a national tradition. Secondly, the preface reminds us, the Oxford history is the product of an 'inwardly turned decade' during which New Zealanders have been uneasy about the course of social change and impatient with 'traditional answers'. In this context, the invigoration of academic history reflected in the book's concern with 'the total life of society' seems a timely complement to the 'widespread quickening of historical interest among New Zealanders at large'.³

Yet for all its strengths, and despite the apparent coincidence of scholarly excitement and public interest in its distinctive orientation, the Oxford history raises at least two large questions about the writing of New Zealand history. They are echoed in other recent work. Succinctly put, these questions address the social role of the historian in the 1980s, and the degree to which the history of New Zealand (or any country for that matter) can be considered *sui generis*. Each is discussed briefly here. Then, because these discussions point to the importance of the vigorously drawn wider canvas, the last part of this paper offers a tentative sketch of a few large (but largely neglected) themes suggested by some recent historical writing on New Zealand. To ponder these matters is not to indict contributors to the Oxford history, or others, as myopes; indeed some of their offerings are remarkably fresh and rich in insight. Nor is it to suggest that the arguments of the last part of this paper are anything more than hypotheses intended to stimulate reflection. Rather it is to go beyond the intent of the individual works noticed in order to raise issues that should form challenging subjects of debate among those interested in New Zealand's past. By doing so, perhaps this note will further the discourse between present and past, and between historians and the public that is one of the central objects of historical inquiry.

2 E.g. reviews by K. Sinclair, R. Shannon, D. A. Hamer, A. Ward, *The New Zealand Journal of History*, XVI (1982), pp.68-76.

3 W. H. Oliver with B. R. Williams (eds.), *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Wellington, 1981, pp.viii-ix.

Two points seem especially pertinent regarding the relationship between the historian and his public: how thoroughgoing is the quickening of society's historical sense? and how effectively do historians satisfy lay expectations of their discipline? On the first, the evidence is by no means clear. Certainly undergraduate enrolments in New Zealand history are larger now than they were a decade ago; local historical societies maintain active membership; despite hard economic times, the publication of work on the past (much of it admittedly in small print-runs and by local historians) has been something of a growth industry in recent years. Yet professional historians are concerned at the tendency to subsume the discipline of history within amorphous 'social studies' in the schools, and many of the more obvious manifestations of public interest in the past seem nostalgic and ephemeral. The enthusiasm for 'period pieces' on cinema and television screens reflects a hankering for more manageable, less complex times. In this age of large cities, mammoth bureaucracies, and impersonal transactions, unease 'about the course of social change' is a world-wide phenomenon.⁴ It is significant that one of its North American manifestations is in 'historical villages' which entice visitors into a simpler more leisurely [sic] pioneering past (characterized by small communities of close knit families in charge of their destinies) that is possibly as apocryphal as it is attractive.⁵ So, too, the various revivals of earlier fashions apparently owe more to the shrewd commercial exploitation of inchoate public sentiment than they do to any deep appreciation of the period from which the models are drawn.

If this is the case, what do those outside university class rooms hope for from professional historians? Arguably, at least, it is a rose-hued story of past times and of those who bestrode them to shape their lives (and possibly those of others) with decisive action. This does not preclude an interest in heroes and heroines from beyond the traditional establishment — the trade union leader or, more likely, the pioneer wife triumphing over isolation and the elements to raise her family with success. But it does seem to imply a view of history as escapism, and with it a sanitized view of the past, the narrative mode — history tells a story — and perhaps an emphasis on biography (of the adulatory kind?), high politics, the monumental project and the upper classes.⁶ At the national scale it may be that these predilections have their corollary in a preference for explorations of the national ethos and sweeping syntheses

4 *ibid.*, p.viii; D. S. Keen, 'History in Secondary Schools, 1976. A Year's Survey', *The New Zealand Journal of History*, XI (1977), pp.180-7.

5 S. Hornsby and G. Wynn, 'Walking through the past', *Acadiensis*, X (1981), pp.152-9.

6 Among the many examples that might be cited, I think of a highly popular account of the building of the Canadian Pacific Railroad which is built around the personalities of the engineers and the politicians rather than the circumstances of labour (P. Berton, *The National Dream: The great railway 1871-1881*, Toronto, 1970) and of M. Girouard, *Life in the English Country House*, New Haven, 1978, which sold over 125,000 copies in hardback.

that proclaim the achievements of nationhood.⁷

Now if this remote sensing of the public's interests is even approximately correct, studies in the mode of much modern social history — revealing complexity, conflict, and division, and dealing in social forces as much as individual initiatives — seem unlikely to capture the hearts and minds of New Zealanders. Herein lies a dilemma for historians.⁸ What do they do if academic history fails to connect with public expectations of the profession?⁹ Ignore the mass audience and write for their peers? This is surely to abdicate the historian's social function, and is potentially dangerous when demands for 'relevance' in academia are growing. Do as American historian Carl Becker once suggested, and provide what everyman and everywoman wants from history? Few are likely to find satisfaction in this option, which some would see as one step forward, two back and several down. Close the gap between the public and the profession and make clear the relevance of the past to the layman? This is no mean challenge. It might be met, in part, by communicating more effectively with the public, and by clarifying what it is that historians do. Possibly a more explicit emphasis on the study of mentalities is the answer.¹⁰ A further solution might be to stress the role of history as a purveyor of values. By whatever means, and as never before, historians need to foster the integration of historical perspective into the thinking of their fellow citizens. With the present-mindedness encouraged by the electronic media, it may be that only concerted efforts in this direction will allow history to retain its vitality and to fulfil its potential as a humanistic and humanizing discipline. None of this is to deny the achievements of recent historical scholarship; it is to urge the importance of remembering that history is ultimately an art, not a social science, and that its social utility is in helping people understand who they are and whence they came. This will not be achieved unless historians communicate the excitement they find in their special fields to a general audience by imaginative reflection upon the broad implications of research results.

Is the history of New Zealand peculiar? Of course, the answer depends upon the scale of inquiry. An affirmative answer is easily sustained by reference to the particular timing and location of historical events, or the

7 cf. P. Berton, *Why we act like Canadians: A personal exploration of our national character*, Toronto, 1982. Graeme Davison, 'Slicing Australian History', *The New Zealand Journal of History*, XVI (1982), pp.3-20 also touches on the issues of this paragraph.

8 That this is a dilemma of history in the late twentieth century is suggested by the introductory remarks (and other sections) of M. Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, Ithaca, 1980, and in several contributions to John Moses, ed., *Historical Disciplines and Cultures in Australasia*, St. Lucia, 1979.

9 cf. C. Degler, 'Remaking American History', *Journal of American History*, LXVII (1980), pp.7-25.

10 L. Stone, 'The revival of narrative: reflections on a new old history', *Past and Present*, LXXXIV (1979), pp.1-24; J. Henretta, 'Social History as lived and written', *American Historical Review*, LXXXIV (1979), pp.1293-1333.

specific actions of individuals. At this level it is possible to argue that contexts and circumstances are never repeated, that no two situations are ever identical. Yet a willingness to seek general patterns, to abstract the common elements from similar developments, suggests an alternative response. To be sure this position implies a loss of detail. But to step back, to accept that basic structural relationships may underlie particular events, to see New Zealand as one of several 'settler societies', and to seek broad interpretative themes in the hubbub of their various pasts is to move towards a comparative perspective that broaches a wider discourse about the nature of society while offering new insights into the particular case.

Now there is little new in the notion of searching for broader patterns. Frederick Jackson Turner long ago rose above the minutiae of state and individual settlement histories to articulate his sweeping frontier theory. Before him, Alexis de Tocqueville stressed the 'great degree of likeness' in the former British colonies of America — which was not to say that they were each and all exactly the same but to recognize that their similarities differentiated them, as a group, from European societies'.¹¹ Still, the advantages of searching thus are worth repeating, because a good deal of recent writing about New Zealand ignores the wider horizon. By implication, at least, the country is considered *sui generis*. The consequence is work that is often rich in contextual detail but which lacks the analytical bite to render its findings of compelling significance to those interested in societies beyond these islands.

Some examples. From a New Zealand perspective, Rollo Arnold's *Farthest Promised Land* is a fascinating book.¹² Replete with detail, illuminating the dynamics of immigration in the 1870s, and sketching the fortunes of dozens of migrants, it is both a useful contribution to our understanding of the New Zealand past, and a candidate for attention beyond the academe despite its 400 pages of close-set type. Students of English emigration and the Revolt of the Field will also turn to the book with profit. Indeed the Hearthland receives considerably more attention than the Promised Land. Yet for all its demonstration of the close tie between changing core and developing periphery, the wider implications of the study are curiously understated. One looks in vain for any explicit statement of the essential dialectic between the facts of individual movement and 'theories' of migration or colonial development. The book offers strikingly few 'detachable conclusions'. A chapter on 'The Transformation of the Immigrant' charts the experience of new arrivals by quotation of their letters home. Thus the search for continuities linking

11 F. J. Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', in *The Frontier in American History*, New York, 1920, pp.1-38; A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Paris, 1835-1840.

12 R. Arnold, *The Farthest Promised Land. English villagers, New Zealand Immigrants of the 1870s*, Wellington, 1981.

old and new and the influences 'transmuting the immigrant into the colonial' becomes almost anecdotal. Elements of the transformation are noted — the whetting of ambition, the uplift of spirit, the lowering of anxiety about poverty, the release from subservience — and the material plenty of the new land is remarked upon ('We can live here . . . we only lingered in England', wrote one newcomer),¹³ but these observations are neither cast in a rigorous analytical framework that might have pinned down or at least illuminated the processes of change, nor considered in relation to the extensive literature on the transformation of nineteenth century migrants to other territories. Arnold's treatment of the development of a colonial homeland consciousness is equally tantalizing. T. S. Eliot's observation that new world societies are inevitably 'bafflingly alike and different from the parent culture' is the vehicle for oblique reference to the ideas of Louis Hartz, but neither the notion of a transplanted fragment nor the complex interaction of metropolitan attachment and colonial experience is explored in depth.¹⁴ A paragraph describing Alan Mulgan's encounter with *Home* illustrates the latter theme, and W. J. Keith's arguments for an 'urban-rural dissociation of sensibility' in England during the 1880s lead to the conclusion that colonial memories were of a vanished world, but none of this really gets to grips with the tensions inherent in relocation or the shape of developing New Zealand ideologies.¹⁵

Among the essays in the Oxford history, those on economy and society in the colonial period prompt particular comment here. Each is a reconnaissance of crucial ground. Each identifies the main configurations of its terrain. Both are more descriptive than analytical. Passing references to such matters as economic dependence on the United Kingdom (and Australia) and the fact of immigration aside, their unblinking focus is on New Zealand. Each is a valuable survey in its way, yet neither fully grapples with the processes of change; their emphases are upon the surface of events. The chapters do not connect the story of economic and social development in early New Zealand to a broader discourse about the nature of new world economies and societies. Of course, more probing empirical treatment of many of their concerns is difficult. Pains-taking, time-consuming work remains to be done; gaps in the data are considerable. But these stumbling blocks only seem to compound the authors' failures to consider their subjects in the wider context of European settlement overseas.

There can be little quarrel with Jeanine Graham's emphasis upon the reconciliation of the imported and the indigenous in her discussion of settler society. In New Zealand as elsewhere the conflict between tradition and change was a leitmotiv of the settlement years. We are not sur-

13 *ibid.*, p.238.

14 *ibid.*, p.355; L. Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies*, New York, 1964.

15 Arnold, p.356; W. J. Keith, *The Rural Tradition*, Toronto, 1974.

prised to read that 'dress and diet, housing styles and housekeeping methods all soon reflected a distinctive colonial air'. Nor does it seem unlikely that 'attitudes and values were much slower to alter, the degree of adaptation depending on a person's position in society'.¹⁶ But which attitudes and values; and why? Again, observant eyes lend credence to the claim that 'rarely was that symbol of industrial oppression, the street of terraced houses, erected in these colonial communities'. Yet we are then told of a new arrival in Wellington who — like others? — found accommodation extremely sparse and expensive in 1879.¹⁷ If indeed there were a housing shortage, why did tenements or other forms of cheap high density accommodation not appear? Ultimately the answers to such questions must come from New Zealand research. But the comparison of New Zealand with other similar settler societies would at least have suggested explanatory hypotheses that might have pushed the analysis a good deal further. Much work on North American settlement points to the conclusion that cultural discard proceeded most quickly and thoroughly in the economic sphere (where 'success' was determined by the calculus of profit and loss), and that cultural retention was stronger in the domestic and ceremonial realms (where traditions might be indulged with little economic consequence).¹⁸ Geographer Cole Harris has suggested that even as early as the seventeenth century, the opportunity of available land combined with a deep-seated craving for family-centred independence to produce dispersed farmsteads rather than village communities across the landscapes of the north eastern American seaboard.¹⁹ Applied to the nineteenth century, such ideas suggest a similar cultural or sentimental explanation for the independent houses of colonial New Zealand. Nor can we discount either the impact of English and American reaction against the evils of the industrial city or the influence of improved forms of intra-urban transport upon the emerging shape of New Zealand cities.²⁰ Indeed the similarities among cities of the same vintage as Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington in Australia and Canada, and their collective distinctiveness from the old centres of Europe is both striking and suggestive of some of the important determinants of New Zealand urban form. Such reflections soon carry us into wider spheres. Harris, for instance, has extended his hypothesis accounting for dispersed rather than nucleated settlement in the new world to argue that the

16 Oliver with Williams, p.121.

17 *ibid.*, p.124.

18 A review and synthesis of some of this work is in G. Wynn 'Settler Societies in Geographical Focus', *Historical Studies*, 20 (1983), pp.353-65.

19 C. Harris, 'The Simplification of Europe Overseas', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, LXVII (1977), pp.469-83.

20 A. Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1968, pp.59-87; P. Hurricks, 'Reactions to urbanization in New Zealand during the 1920s' M.A. thesis, University of Canterbury, 1975.

20 G. Bloomfield, 'Urban Tramways in New Zealand, 1862-1964', *New Zealand Geographer*, XXXI (1975), pp.99-123.

lowered threshold of access to land created by the drastically changed ratio of population to territory in the new world dramatically simplified seventeenth-century colonial society, making it more egalitarian.²¹ Can such a framework help us to understand the underlying processes of social change in nineteenth-century New Zealand, where market connections and technological arsenals were far greater than in the areas examined by Harris? Alternatively, might close examination of the record of New Zealand's Wakefieldian settlements add qualifications to the simplification hypothesis and thus sharpen our understanding of the ways in which all colonial societies took shape? Either way, the advantages to be derived from a form of dialectical tacking between local detail and broader hypothesis seem manifest.²²

Staple dependence is a familiar theme in the history of new settled lands, and it is one that underpins Jim Gardner's wide-ranging treatment of New Zealand's colonial economy. Yet again its implications are not pursued as they might have been. Of course, much of the reason probably lies in the particular requirements of the Oxford history, with its demand for comprehensive treatment and its limitations on the space available to individual contributors. Suffice it here, then, to note the relevance of some recent writing on the patterns of colonial economic development from beyond New Zealand to further analysis of the New Zealand scene. To date we know little about the growth of New Zealand's urban system. Theoretically, geographers have argued that towns develop in response to demand, but in newly settled regions urban growth arguably owes less to the demands of local consumers than it does to the needs of merchant-wholesalers engaged in moving staple commodities from hinterland supply areas to metropolitan markets.²³ If so, then the bulk, perishability and processing and transportation demands of particular staple products are likely determinants of the size and spatial arrangement of ports and hinterland towns in new-settled territories.²⁴ What, then, were the consequences of the wool, wheat, and meat trades for the growth of urban places in the South Island, of the kauri and dairy industries for the North? More than this, the nature of staple production appears to have been a crucial influence upon the cost and availability of labour in the nineteenth-century United States and Britain. Some have argued from this that levels of industrialization were correlated, in turn, with 'imperfections' in seasonal staple labour markets that allowed entrepreneurs to profit from the relatively low

21 Harris pp.470-83.

22 cf. C. Geertz, 'On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding', *American Scientist*, LXIII (1975), p.52.

23 W. Christaller, *Central Places in Southern Germany*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1966. J. E. Vance Jr., *The Merchant's World: The Geography of Wholesaling*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1970.

24 C. Earle and R. Hoffman, 'Staple crops and urban development in the Eighteenth Century South', *Perspectives in American History*, X (1976), pp.7-78.

wages necessary to lure workers from countrysides providing only three to six months of employment a year.²⁵ In this light one must ask how far the late nineteenth-century drive to put the small man on the land of New Zealand worked to undermine the development of local industry. In more general terms, such questions remind us of the complexity of the power relationships embodied in the labour process in new world settlements and demonstrate the importance of determining wage levels, subsistence costs and the availability and seasonality of work if we are to understand the evolving economic and social patterns of the settlement colonies.

These observations are not intended to urge New Zealand historians into ritualistic obeisance at the shrines of Turner and Hartz. Nor are they to suggest the mechanistic application of frontier, fragment or other theories to local experience. After all, several earlier attempts to shape colonial developments to a Turnerian last demonstrate the problems of applying the frontier thesis deductively, and Louis Hartz's ideas still await convincing implementation. It is, however, to acknowledge a growing interest in comparative studies of settler societies and an expanding literature on the interdependence of international development that recognizes the interconnections among large scale systems of areas and events. At its best, this work is integrative and interdisciplinary; it uncovers, as Bernard Bailyn has observed, 'patterns of filiation and derivation', and its synoptic perspective allows the particular and the general to illuminate one another and to reveal significant variables of change in new world settings.²⁶ Much of this diverse literature is surely relevant to the New Zealand case. By more explicit incorporation of its perspectives into their thinking about this country, New Zealand historians might sharpen their understanding of the local scene while ensuring — to use the phrase of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz — that their studies contributed to 'wall size culture-scapes' instead of adding to a collection, however impressive, of 'miniatures'.²⁷

Finally, a quick and deliberately provocative sketch of some facets of New Zealand's past, suggested *en passant* in the Oxford history, and outlined here, in a form dangerously close to caricature, provides a springboard for comparative reflection. There is no longer much question that Wakefieldian dreams faded quickly in New Zealand. Social levelling was common. Some came with wealth and some prospered more than others, but if the early colonists were divided into 'sets', there was

25 C. Earle and R. Hoffman, 'The Foundation of the Modern Economy: Agriculture and the Costs of Labour in the United States and England, 1800-60', *American Historical Review*, LXXXV (1980), pp.1055-94.

26 B. Bailyn, 'The Challenge of Modern Historiography', *American Historical Review*, LXXXVII (1982), pp.1-24.

27 C. Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, London, 1975, p.21.

little subservience and 'no set of exclusives' (p.134). Before 1880 men of modest means could confidently aspire to the common goal of land ownership. Despite occasional hard times most migrants had their 'chance to get on' (pp.112, 157-9). The twenty years before 1914 saw 'the triumph of the family farm' (p.257). Until the late 1930s, indeed, almost half of all New Zealanders lived on farms and in small towns. There the virtues of self-reliance and economic individualism were enshrined. Later, New Zealand was envisaged as 'a country where the plenty of the machine age shall assure to all the rich life in goods and leisure', and until the 1970s, 'each generation of New Zealanders had access to more goods and services than its predecessors' (pp.398, 370). An increasing proportion of these generations was urban, but from the 1920s the ideology of suburban expansion fed on the carrot of 'better access to home ownership' and fattened 'the Pakeha ethos of possessive individualism, equality, [and] cultural homogeneity' (pp.274, 404). Such were the foundations of a deep-seated conviction that New Zealand was a material utopia. In this view the 'little mean dwellings painted a chocolate brown', with their gardens of 'cabbage stalks, sick hens and tomato cans', that so repelled Katherine Mansfield, were powerful symbols of the small man's success in establishing his independence.

That the experience of many coal-miners, kauri-gum diggers, itinerant swaggers and 'sweated labourers' bore little resemblance to this pattern was ultimately less important than the widespread belief in an egalitarianism that, ambiguously, embraced both equality of opportunity and equality of condition (p.398). Syndicalism and radical socialism had their day in New Zealand, but it was short; the language of class war reverberated early this century, but by 1919 candidates of the newly formed Labour party 'stressed "improvement" rather than "transformation"' (p.214). Thereafter, the ethos of equality sapped class consciousness and pragmatism challenged doctrine in the formulation of policy. The goal of land nationalization — 'a hell of a grill to toast a candidate on' (p.218) — was dropped in the 1920s. Although the 'labour laws' of the 1890s prompted Albert Métin to describe New Zealand as the 'classical land of state socialism', they, and later initiatives, were 'evasions' and 'palliatives' of the sort against which William Morris railed in England. At heart, most New Zealanders were liberal individualists who accepted the necessity of a growing, state-erected infrastructure for the continued development and prosperity of a small capitalist economy in a remote and often rugged environment. Generally, government intervention maintained law, order, private property, and social harmony, and revitalized belief in the openness of opportunity when individual efforts and *laissez faire* attitudes failed to sustain it. Just as depression and constriction of the small man's opportunities for advancement in the 1880s paved the way for the social reforms of the 1890s, so the hardships of the 1930s preceded Labour's election in 1935. Just as closer settlement promised to put the small man on the land of the 'burst up . . . big estates' so institutional change after 1935

aimed at 'restoring a decent standard of living to those who have been deprived' without implementing wide public ownership (pp.334-5).

Arguably, the plentiful land, cheap food, and high wages of colonial New Zealand established a middle class ethos of opportunity and egalitarianism that was reinforced by the experience of successive generations of immigrants whose life-chances were enhanced by continuing exploitation of a rich and sparsely peopled environment. Alternative ideologies found expression, but such was the setting that they survived, in the long term, only as hybrids, their strength dependent upon accommodation to prevailing aspirations for a secure and materially affluent existence.

Abbreviated — and thus full of pitfalls — as this précis is, it suggests an integrated perspective on the New Zealand past. Some of its emphases require qualification; in some respects its very starkness is misleading. But it does place the New Zealand experience squarely in a comparative framework from which further understanding might come. Most broadly, it sketches a connection between the political philosophy, the mentalité or (less grandly) the outlook of New Zealanders and their relationship to their environment (in the broadest sense of that term). The precise nature of the relationship remains to be worked out. At one level there are obvious parallels between the New Zealand pattern outlined above and that discerned in the United States by the historian David Potter. Comparing radical thought in Europe and America, Potter remarked that the tradition of European radicalism was to struggle for a share of a finite pie; the American pattern, on the other hand, was to seek a piece of the expanding action.²⁸ These contrasting stances he summed up in the slogans 'Soak the rich' (Europe) and 'Deal me in' (U.S.A.), for it seemed clear to Potter that American radicals were less concerned to strip the rich of their fortunes than to maintain everyman's right to mass-produced replicas of the trappings of wealth. Expressed differently, this was to point to the deeply entrenched middle-class aspirations of American society, aspirations originating, according to Potter, in American abundance or, according to later more empirical studies, in the peculiarly open circumstances of settlement on the mid-Atlantic seaboard.²⁹ Of course, no one would argue that New Zealand is America in these things, but there is no gainsaying the importance of understanding the nature of New Zealanders' relationship to their land if we would understand this society. Even to ponder New Zealand's place on the continuum between European and American extremes is to raise questions about similarities and differences and their causes that should encourage fresh perspectives on the New Zealand experience. Consider for a

28 D. Potter, *People of Plenty. Economic Abundance and the American Character*, Chicago, 1969, pp.111-27.

29 J. T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of early Southeastern Pennsylvania*, Baltimore, 1972.

moment the distinction drawn by the influential French anarchist and socialist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, between the traditional relationship of man and land, which linked them as 'partners in a marriage', and the way in which modern men 'are attached to the land as they are to a tool, or even less than that, to some thing which enables them to levy a certain revenue each year'.³⁰ New Zealand — like most other territories of European settlement overseas, a capitalist society from its inception — bears the mark of this modernity; by recognizing as much we will better understand its distinctiveness. Is it too much to suggest that the connection of New Zealanders with their land has contributed to the essential liberalism — the placing of individual freedom and material gain over that of the public interest — of New Zealand society?

To begin with the liberal or middle-class ethos of New Zealand is of course to frame an apparent conundrum: how to account for the pattern of extensive government intervention in the economic, social and industrial spheres of New Zealand life. Progressives would stress the efficacy of popular demand, identify a widespread inclination for compassion, and proclaim the achievement of social justice. This, indeed, is hard to reconcile with the liberal individualist argument. But it is by no means the only interpretation that the evidence will bear. Without denying humanistic and democratic impulses, it seems as well to recognize that paternalistic concerns for order, efficiency and control have been very much a part of the impetus to government action on several fronts, including industrial conditions, land settlement and labour legislation.³¹ It might even be suggested — with the Canadian parallel firmly in mind — that New Zealand labour policy was largely shaped by the preconditions of a small and remote staple-dependent economy.³² To compress a complex discussion to the extreme, the argument here might run as follows. Economic development in the nineteenth century depended on the construction of an expensive infra-structure which only the government was able to put in place. Having committed itself to such investment, the government was compelled to protect it against the instability of a staple-based economy and disruption by labour action. Thus, the Meat Export Control Act, the Rural Advances Act, the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act and so on. Whittled down, this account is obviously too lean, but to persist (if the Canadian analogue can be pressed any further) it might be suggested that the very peculiarities of the staple economy led workers to accept state intervention more readily than, for example, their counterparts in the United States. Probing, careful work on the New

30 Cited by R. C. Harris, 'The Historical Geography of North American Regions', *American Behavioural Scientist*, XXII (1978), p.128.

31 This argument is suggested by W. H. Oliver, 'Social Policy in the Liberal Period', *The New Zealand Journal of History*, XIII (1979), pp.25-33.

32 The 'Canadian' argument here follows P. Craven, *An Impartial Umpire: Industrial Relations and the Canadian State, 1900-1911*, Toronto, 1980.

Zealand evidence will refute, refine or confirm such hypotheses; for the moment they seem well worth exploring.

Perhaps, too, there is a key to reflection upon a central paradox of the New Zealand scene in all of this. Despite the achievements and frequent celebration of New Zealand 'progressivism' from the 1890s onwards, contributors to the Oxford history point to the deep seated 'conservatism of the early twentieth century electorate' and the slender prospects for the 'radicalization of increasing numbers of New Zealanders' in the future. The book itself points up the contradiction. As one reviewer recognized, 'while it celebrates the process of deepening self-awareness as defined by a dissident liberal intelligentsia', it provides 'a compendium of reasons why that intelligentsia is likely to remain in dissent from a stolidly unimpressible social reality'.³³ In the most general terms, it would seem that the opportunity of New Zealand has reinforced a basic faith in the small man, a belief in the competence of the individual, and a sense of the importance of private property among most of its people, for whom home, family, independence, prosperity — the leitmotifs of middle class life — are pervasive values. Although they also esteem the sovereignty of the common man, syndicalism and socialism draw little sympathy from this large group. Ideas rooted in the European left have become defences of a conservative position with their transplantation to the more open circumstances of New Zealand. The frustration of those who would maintain the European radical tradition here thus stems, in some degree at least, from the fact that in New Zealand, as elsewhere, new world plenty has had its way of 'gradually extracting the political sting from . . . immigrants'.³⁴ Sometime Wellington poet, Peter Bland, surely recognized as much in asking: 'What more could we want . . . ?' when, after being raised to expect so little in the homeland 'we settle here like convalescents' to 'build our hospital homes of sun and butter'. Might it not be that 'All that remains is to play the nurse / In this sanatorium for British anger?'³⁵

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33 Shannon, p.70-71.

34 Oliver with Williams, p.337; Arnold, p.330 offers evidence to this effect too.

35 P. Bland, 'Remembering England', in *Mr. Maui: Poems by Peter Bland*, London, 1976, pp.24-25. A debate largely uninitiated in New Zealand but gaining attention elsewhere seems of some broad relevance to the issues raised above. In essence it concerns the political significance of housing tenure. See, for example, P. Dunleavy, 'The urban basis of political alignment: social class; domestic property ownership and state intervention in consumption processes', *British Journal of Political Science*, IX (1979), pp.409-43; J. Kemeny, *The myth of homeownership*, London, 1981; G. Pratt, 'Class analysis and urban domestic property: a critical re-examination', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, VI (1982), pp.481-502.