

*The University Grants Committee 1961-1986. A History.* By John Gould. University Grants Committee, Wellington, 1988. 246pp. NZ price: \$40.85.

PROFESSOR GOULD gives us a good account of the UGC's role in securing resources for the New Zealand universities over its first 25 years. It clings, it seems, rather closely to the papers in the vaults, and maybe it tells us too little of the personal interplay that must have backed up many of the negotiations with other Departments. The clinching argument seems, more than once, the threat that 'open entry' would have to be abandoned. With all its vagueness — and despite its practical erosion — the phrase still has some political power. But, while a less formal history might have been a more controversial publication, it might also have explained more fully, not only the particular negotiations the UGC undertook, but the attitudes to it, and to the universities, among the bureaucrats and politicians in Wellington. Professor Gould, a former Professor of Economic History, has a clarity of style not always found in such a quarter and that, and his evident capacity for witty perception, would have stood him and us in good stead in such a history.

Maybe, too, there is a larger issue involved. Professor Gould admits to leaving some gaps in his history. He does not deal with two well-known post-Hughes Parry institutions, though unfortunately he makes passing gibes at them. The Universities Entrance Board indeed has an important role he might have noticed: it mediates between school and university, limiting the impact the demands university entrance might otherwise make, and provides an avenue along which expertise for school and university meet. Curriculum Committee's proceedings Professor Gould tends to see as an exchange of trivia or a trading of horses. But, aside from its latter-day role in rationalization, and its role throughout in monitoring the standards of courses, it is also an adjunct to a system that has helped New Zealand students move, carrying credit, from university to university with a freedom envied in other countries, including the United Kingdom.

Not only are there such avowed gaps: the main narrative in the book is about the provision of resources. The UGC had other tasks as well. No doubt it was properly not in the business of public relations in general. But it represented the system as a whole to the government, and in a sense to the public. Quite evidently, government and public understood and understand too little about universities, and that has contributed to the crisis the universities now face. If the universities and their staff are partly at fault, the UGC may also be somewhat to blame for this situation.

The focus of UGC was indeed on resources, though less completely than Gould's emphasis suggests. That in itself perhaps tended to lead the universities to contend with it, rather than to work with it for the benefit of the system as a whole. Perhaps more crucially still it led the UGC to a crisis of confidence in itself. In this, indeed, Gould's drafts may have played some part. Partly available during 1987, they made it plain that the universities' funding levels had declined since the mid-1970s. The conclusion was perhaps too readily drawn, despite Gould's own caution, p.189, that the UGC had been a failure and that either the UGC system was wrong or the people manning the UGC had battled insufficiently vigorously, or both. Too little account was taken of other factors at work. Nor, crucially, was consideration given to what would do a better job.

The result has been that the UGC had few defenders, and that they did not even include its own members. No bureaucrat ever liked an anomaly: a quango is always in a weak position. A government that sought more direct accountability, and wanted, for good or bad reasons, to give every system a shake-up, had no sympathy for it.

In abandoning this device for securing and allocating resources, other tasks are also left undone. In particular the universities are placed directly under a Ministry, with none of that insulation from political and bureaucratic control that the UGC was designed to

provide. Universities, each on its own, may be poorly placed to prevent the depreciation of the standards they have managed to attain during what may be called the UGC period.

If too little account has been taken of the future, too little account has been taken of past achievements. The Universities have made major advances, thanks to their staff, their students, the taxpayers, the government. Whatever new system emerges must not undermine these achievements, either by under-funding the institutions, or by undermining their autonomy, their commitment to research and scholarship, to the liberal as well as the vocational.

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*The Story of Birkenhead.* By Margaret McClure. Birkenhead City Council, Birkenhead, 1987. 223pp. NZ price: \$29.95.

MANY a municipal history has been purchased out of loyalty, skimmed and shelved unread by the very residents for whom the book ostensibly was written. *The Story of Birkenhead* should not suffer the same fate. Margaret McClure has produced a sparkling and evocative account of Birkenhead's development from horticultural wasteland to cosmopolitan city. Commissioned by the Birkenhead City Council to commemorate the centenary of borough status granted in 1988, this study outlines but moves beyond the personalities, policies, and problems of local government in order to give a rich impression of the community that Birkenhead office-bearers were seeking to serve.

The book is divided into 15 chapters, and one appendix listing mayors and councillors. Chapter I traces the fate of the Kawerau tribes in pre-European times, thereby establishing the Maori dimension which recurs as appropriate in the text. The next four chapters focus on the difficult establishment decades, from the 1840s to the late 1880s. The 'grinding cycle of work and hardship' (p.37) is well depicted, as is the stoicism of many of those caught up in it. Chapter 6 outlines the administrative problems affecting this Auckland outpost and traces the emergence of the new Birkenhead borough in April/May 1888. Today's residents, occasionally inconvenienced by a temporary power failure, might spare a thought for the borough's first mayor and councillors whose monthly meetings had to be planned for the nearest full moon, given the difficulty of traversing Birkenhead's treacherous and unlit roads in the dark. Chapters 7-12, covering the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first four decades of the twentieth, continue to trace the economic, social, and political developments that contributed significantly to the shaping of this borough, so much a part of Auckland historically, yet apart geographically. The many schemes for bridging that distance are noted in Chapter 13, which extends from 1860 to 1959. The final two chapters deal with the dramatic changes in population, housing, landscape, and employment opportunities that followed after the opening of the harbour bridge.

A number of factors contribute to this book's success. The first is Margaret McClure's facility with language. It is the ease with which information, understanding, and enthusiasm are conveyed to the reader that makes the text such a pleasure to read. Second, the selection of typeface and layout seems to have been made with the comfort of older readers in mind. Neither text nor illustrations are crowded on to the pages. Photographs, well-selected, are clear and large with adequate identifying captions, although there is no indication that all undated photographs belong to the time period of the chapters in which they appear. Third, there has obviously been a determination that the book should reflect