

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

the experiences and contributions of both 'ordinary' and exceptional residents, and both young and old. A skilful interweaving of direct quotation from nineteenth-century manuscripts and twentieth-century oral evidence has attained that objective. Thus there is a glimpse of a city schoolgirl's response to this 'most wild and desolate place' in 1879 to complement the outline of her well-to-do father's contribution to the district (pp.47-51); we read of the colour imparted by eccentric philosopher, meteorologist, gardener, and showman, Clement Wragge (pp.133-4); and can reflect on the role of women in wartime as typified by Millie Evans's cabbage-planting team (pp.168-9). Chapters and paragraphs on the Chelsea Sugar Refinery (which contributed financial assistance towards the publication of the book) and the strawberry growers of Zion Hill include people's everyday experiences. Children found nothing romantic in picking strawberries when their fingers and feet were freezing from the early morning dew. The traumas of war and Depression and the responses of individuals to these national crises have also been particularly well handled. It is a failing, however, that many of the unpublished sources listed in the bibliography are not given specific locations. Nor is there any indication, apart from a fleeting reference to an oral history collection at Birkenhead Public Library, whether the interviews with Birkenhead residents would be available for other researchers.

Set in the context of writings on regional history, *The Story of Birkenhead* has an emphasis on social history comparable to that of two place-getters in the recent round of judging from the J.M. Sherrard Award (Dick Scott, *Seven Lives on Salt River*, Auckland, 1987 and Gerard Morris et al., *Waiuta 1906-1951: the Gold Mine, the Town, the People*, Reefton, 1986). Taken together, the three books demonstrate the diversity of approaches that it is possible to adopt in order to capture the character of a community and district. Margaret McClure's work, providing as it does the broader context in which to set Peter Luke's more specific study on Chelsea, *Sugar Workers, Sugar Town*, will be an invaluable reference work for students engaged in studies of Birkenhead and its environs.

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The Orpheus Disaster. By Thayer Fairburn. Western Publishing Company, Waiuku, 1987. 242pp. NZ price: \$39.95.

THE STORY of HMS *Orpheus* is a dramatic one, one that has intrigued many who have gazed out over the changing moods of the Tasman Sea while visiting the Manukau Heads. It is not hard for such visitors to the West Coast to imagine the *Orpheus*, as Fairburn tells us, 'very small and indistinct, her hull only occasionally visible over the breakers — just three masts with the white of her canvas shining in the brilliant afternoon sunlight'. I have always wondered how she had come to be wrecked, and was pleased to read this detailed account of New Zealand's worst maritime disaster.

The *Orpheus*, one of a new class of corvette, was launched in 1860 and posted very shortly afterwards to the Australian squadron at Sydney. The book provides a detailed account of the passage to Australia and the experiences of the vessel and her crew, based on the evidence of the log. For those with an interest in life at sea during this period, much material of interest is provided, though there are moments of repetition and little homilies on human foibles, which all become somewhat irritating. Finally, in Chapter 13 the *Orpheus* departs from Sydney on 31 January 1863 for her fated passage to Auckland.

The account of the wreck, and of the inquiries that followed, make fascinating reading.