

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 It is a failing, however, that many of the unpublished sources listed in the bibliography are not given specific locations.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.

JEANINE GRAHAM

University of Waikato

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.

The confusion at the time of grounding, the efforts to effect rescue and the chaos attendant upon this, are well described. Sensibly, Fairburn lets the participants speak for themselves, and clarifies the more confusing areas of evidence with extracts from contemporary maps, clear sketch maps of his own, and with photographs and illustrations. The book is most successful in illustrating how fallible memory is, and in showing the weakness of eye-witness accounts as evidence when attempting to reach conclusions about disasters on this scale. Equally, it brings out the apparent inability of courts of inquiry to attribute blame impartially and their preference, as in the case of the court martial, 'to seek the causes of the disaster elsewhere, indeed anywhere else than in the higher ranks of the service'. We can also consider how often procedures presented by company or government authorities have, through over-familiarity and neglect, contributed to a major disaster. It happened, in part, with the wreck of the *Wairarapa* in 1894, and it is clearly of major significance in the *Orpheus* story. In the discussion of these aspects of the disaster, Fairburn has been meticulous in his research, and the evidence that he provides is absorbing, and damning.

This is a book of comprehensive and fascinating detail, such as the information obtained from Aihepene Kaihau that the Manukau Bar was dry land some 170 years ago. It may seem improbable to geographers; it certainly indicates the difficulty of charting sandbars. On the other hand, Kaihau's oral account was possibly a memory of the Kaipara. As the product of what is clearly a lifetime's interest, the book covers a perspective much wider than the mere wrecking of the *Orpheus*. The research is meticulous, setting out the background, the events, and the aftermath of the disaster. But so much material is presented that at times the actual meaning and impact of the tragedy are obscured. Fairburn has tried to provide for popular appeal by writing an easily readable story that links all aspects of the disaster. But it does not sit comfortably with the well-researched and detailed presentation of information concerning the design, equipping, and journeying of the ship beforehand; of the events surrounding the wrecking of the vessel; and of the aftermath of the disaster. The book would have had greater impact as a scholarly work of impressive authority or, alternatively, with less detail, as a publication aimed more at the story-telling market. In comparison with other books on New Zealand coastal misadventures and wrecks, however, *The Orpheus Disaster* measures most favourably. My only real criticism concerns the actual publication process: my copy, infuriatingly, fell to pieces as it was read. The book deserved to be much better bound.

DAVID COLLIER

University of Auckland