

Reviews

A Pastoral Kingdom Divided: Cheviot, 1889-94. By W.J. Gardner. Bridget Williams Books, with assistance from the Historical Publications Branch, Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1992. xiii, 246pp. NZ price: \$45.00.

IN 1956 a young Canterbury historian published his first book, *The Amuri; a county history*. Well received, despite the contemporary unfashionability of New Zealand history, that book came to be regarded as a classic of New Zealand local studies. In subsequent years the historian was diverted: to analyses of early twentieth-century politics; to oversight of completion of the multi-volume Canterbury regional history; to forays into intellectual history; not least, to the meticulous supervision of several generations of post-graduate students, something gratefully acknowledged in the *festschrift* presented to him in 1980. He was uncharacteristically active — for a professional historian — in endeavours to preserve extant historical evidence, whether documents or artefacts, and to demonstrate its significance to a wider community. Now, nearly 40 years later, Jim Gardner has returned, in retirement, to his family hearth, this time to the circumstances in which the Cheviot Hills estate was subdivided for closer settlement. Although the author is at pains to point out that his latest book is not a local history *per se*, rather ‘a study of the significance of Cheviot in New Zealand history’, it is a work only someone of his breadth could have successfully attempted. He brings to it all the insights, the maturity of judgement, of a lifetime devoted to study of the nation’s past. *A Pastoral Kingdom Divided* is almost certainly Gardner’s finest written contribution to New Zealand historical scholarship.

The story of Cheviot, its acquisition and subdivision by the Crown, has long been regarded as a landmark in New Zealand rural history. For a century it has been part of the Liberal epic. Swept to power on a land reform platform, determined to rout the ‘social pests’ (large landholders), the radicals set to with a will. Forced acquisition of the Cheviot estate has been portrayed as the first real breach in the wall of landholding privilege, an effective demonstration that the new government meant business, a paving of the way for future sequestrations. Further, it has been an epic replete with heroic figures, most notably the ‘Hon Jock’ McKenzie, Minister of Lands, depicted as laying about with his metaphorical claymore. It has taken Gardner’s skilful detective work to demonstrate convincingly that the sale of Cheviot was not forced, certainly not by the state; that, propaganda apart, Cheviot provided a poor precedent for future land acquisitions, the Liberals finding it necessary to fashion other strategies to ensure ongoing land supply for small settlers; and that McKenzie was not necessarily overwhelmingly dominant in the early conduct of the affair. Why, then, has the popular version stood unchallenged for so long? This is a question Gardner himself addresses in an epilogue devoted to the place of Cheviot in New Zealand historiography. His principal conclusion is that there has been a disquieting tendency to forego, as one previous writer put it, ‘the retreading of ... well

worn paths'. That the key facts were well known has been assumed. Yet the accepted last word on Cheviot, sometimes unrecognized, has been from he who wrote the first, Reeves, who as a Liberal Cabinet Minister was scarcely an impartial observer. Accepted by most early commentators, recycled by J.B. Condliffe with unresearched speculations added, the Reevesian interpretation survived relatively unscathed until a preliminary paper by Gardner in 1966. Though in recent years his conjectures have been noted by some, more detailed examination has awaited his renewed attention.

With the substantive chapters being grouped in three parts, the first (chapters 1-6) provides the necessary backdrop to the events of 1889-94. Initially, the antecedents of William ('Ready Money') Robinson, founder of Cheviot Hills, are set down. Then his assemblage of the 84,000 acre estate, all for little more than £31,000, is carefully reconstructed. Obviously Robinson's nickname was well-merited. By 1882 he was officially recorded as the second largest individual holder of freehold lands in the colony. In 33 years the value of his estate increased tenfold. But was he a 'social pest'? In the light of his perceived great wealth it is easy to overlook that much of the increment arose from shrewd investment in good stock and estate improvements. While in common with other large pastoral landholders Robinson felt the squeeze from depressed wool prices in the difficult 1880s, although his climbing overdraft at the Union Bank owed as much to his involvement in horse-racing and to marriage settlements, it was to be his family situation which eventually impelled the crisis which was to culminate in the state's acquisition of Cheviot Hills. Upon Robinson's death in September 1889, the estate passed to his five daughters, his only son having died in infancy. It was imperative that there be common cause if the estate was to be retained. That the daughters' aspirations greatly varied, however, soon became evident, to the torment of the appointed trustees. Foremost among the latter was Wellington barrister F.H.D. (Harry) Bell, son of F.D., but more critically in this instance married to Robinson's third daughter, Caroline. The hitherto unrecognized manipulator in the Cheviot saga, Bell bestrides Gardner's pages. Shrewd, a natural leader, he soon recognized that the sisters' interests were irreconcilable, or insufficiently so to meet their individual demands and also pay off the estate's debts. Hence he resolved that Cheviot must be sold. What remained, apart from persuasion of those reluctant amongst the sisters, was to determine the most remunerative avenue of sale in a generally depressed land market. With the February 1891 advent of the Liberals, and passage of an amended Land and Income Assessment Act in the same year, Bell sensed his chance. Under the terms of the Act there was provision for state acquisition of land where there was dispute over the level of assessment of tax liability, at the owner's lower valuation. To Bell, this suggested a satisfactory mechanism for resolution of the trustees' problems.

Just why the state readily acquiesced in Bell's strategem is outlined in Part Two (Chapters 7-12). In fact, the opportunity to acquire Cheviot, relatively painlessly, was an unexpected windfall for the Ballance Government. For nearly two decades 'bursting up the big estates' had been a catchcry throughout the colony. It was a time when the theories of J.S. Mill and Henry George held wide appeal. Despite much pre-election rhetoric, however, there had been precious little 'bursting' in the Liberal's first years of office. In the face of Legislative Council opposition, insufficient funds had been provided for purchasing under the early 'Land for Settlements' legislation. As much as Bell and the trustees were seeking a way out of their difficulties, so were the incumbent politicians. They snapped at the bait proffered. Acquisition of Cheviot would be a symbolic gesture, one important with land so scarce in the South Island, particularly with another election not far distant. Further, with parliament out of session, acquisition under the legislation could be carried through with a minimum of scrutiny. Only 81 days elapsed between Bell's proposal and the Crown's acceptance. What Gardner's researches also conclusively show is that, while a powerful influence, McKenzie by no means exclusively drove

the acquisitional process. Management of the purchase was not in the hands of his officials but those of the Commissioner of Taxes, responsible to Ballance. That the Liberal leaders held differing views is apparent. Even after the purchase was concluded, they were at odds over disposition of the estate, Ballance favouring settlement by the urban landless and McKenzie disposal to experienced small farmers. It was to be Ballance's death that enabled McKenzie to have his way and reap the kudos. The adroitness with which the purchase was carried through in the face of such conflicts owed much to the skill of the officials involved. While Gardner goes too far in claiming that no civil servant prior to the 1890s left an enduring reputation, there can be no questioning that in these years the service was invigorated. Nevertheless, despite the feeding of popular expectations, it must soon have become clear that Cheviot would be a 'one off', the tax legislation being a too clumsy, and potentially expensive, instrument for regular acquisitions.

Part Three (Chapters 13-16) focuses on how, once acquired, Cheviot was disposed of under constant pressure. Lands Department officials prepared the first sections for ballot inside twelve months. This was a considerable feat. It is at this point that another of Gardner's major players emerges: John Marchant, Canterbury's Commissioner of Crown Lands. It was to Marchant, involved in the enterprise from the outset, that McKenzie delegated responsibility for carrying his ideas into effect. He was to be well pleased. The settlement plan that Marchant came up with, though irking some Liberal elements, provided for a balanced rural settlement. Though the promotion of family-based small farming remained the primary intention, small grazing runs and village settlements were also included. It was a blueprint for interdependence, the largest selectors notionally providing employment for those on the smallest lots. The available sections attracted nearly 2000 applications, around 350 selectors being successful. Gardner then proceeds to analyse the successful selectors' backgrounds, enabling a comparison with D.B. Waterson's findings for the later subdivided Matamata estate (*NZJH*, III, 1 (1969)). As in the Waikato, the majority of the selectors were from close to hand, nearly 90% from the Canterbury Land District. At Cheviot, *prima facie*, there were fewer experienced farmers, but as Gardner points out, this may be illusory. Those who became the solid and permanent core of the settlement, the holders of the largest sections, were experienced farmers almost to a man. It stands to reason that these had some, if not necessarily substantial, capital resources. The chances of ultimate success varied with the scale of operations. It can be scarcely surprising that recasting of the settlement soon commenced.

Rarely does a reviewer encounter a book about which it is difficult to be critical. This is one. Undoubtedly it is a significant book. But the questions remain, how significant, and in what ways? Does it, for example, fundamentally alter the interpretation of major issues in New Zealand history? Realistically, the answer must be no. As Gardner acknowledges, while what actually happened with respect to Cheviot was in no way inevitable, by the 1890s the day of the smaller, more intensive, farmer was to hand. Large scale farm settlement through state action might well have begun in some other way at some other place. That it would begin was what was inevitable. Choice of Cheviot as the experimental site was the result of a largely unforeseeable confluence of private and public interests. In making this clear, the author adds substantially to our knowledge of the background to, and the camouflaged machinations surrounding, this acknowledged 'turning point' in New Zealand's rural history. Gardner, however, discerns another 'turning point' in the Cheviot episode, an unprecedented expansion of executive power in government. While harder to sustain in the absence of further research, he makes his case sufficiently strongly to stimulate that research. Yet, for the present writer, the primary significance of the book lies in the object lessons for New Zealand historians. In Gardner's view, the historian's task is 'to analyse what actually happened, and why it happened at that time'. Cheviot, he writes, constitutes 'a warning against accepting

generalizations not based on all aspects, including chance elements, in a situation'. Further, it is an encouragement 'to look again at particular events or wider episodes in order to test or amend the received wisdom'. Salutory words. In these terms, Gardner's is a cautionary tale, but one delivered in a characteristically dryly entertaining style. On reflection, that is what might have been expected from perhaps New Zealand's most undersung, and modest, historical master craftsman.

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The Red Feds: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism and the New Zealand Federation of Labour 1908-1913. By Erik Olssen. Auckland, Oxford University Press, 1988. 312pp. NZ price: \$60.00.

OVER THE LAST decade, New Zealand trade unions have entered a period of major crisis. It is therefore ironic that during these years New Zealand labour history has flowered as never before. And among the conferences held, and books, articles, and union and community histories which have appeared it is Erik Olssen's *Red Feds* which stands out as the most sustained and important contribution to the literature.

Olssen's achievement is manifold. He skilfully weaves together a mixture of political events, union history, more general processes of union development, shifts of population and economic power, and thus gives a new social context, meaning, and importance to various aspects of the legal and institutional framework of industrial relations in New Zealand which have hitherto tended to dominate accounts of this period by labour historians. Out of the discourse of the central actors of his story — the miners, shearers, labourers, flax workers, and seamen — he confidently restores a vocabulary of class into the centre of New Zealand historiography.

Moreover, Olssen reshapes and redefines our historical understanding of the origins of the Labour party, first noting the growth in union membership which gave the party a solid mass base, making New Zealand by 1913 the third highest country in the world in the density of its union membership. But his major argument rests on the effect of the industrial struggles of 1912 and 1913 in developing class consciousness among New Zealand's urban workers: indeed, he writes explicitly of the making of a working class. The shift from industrial to political action after 1913 was not, as conventionally described, a recognition of the folly of direct action, for without the experience of industrial organization and struggle the preconditions for the political successes to come would have been established.

The book takes us into a world few New Zealanders would otherwise imagine could have existed here: the role of the IWW, much more important and crucial in this brief but central episode in New Zealand history than hitherto acknowledged; gun battles between strikers and 'specials' in the streets; the afternoon of 20 October 1913 when striking workers virtually controlled the streets of Wellington and, according to the editor of *Truth*, could and should have marched on parliament and seized power! Yet while some parts of the story encourage reader involvement in the texture of events, there is also much excessive narrative detail elsewhere which discourages deep immersion. And while Olssen acknowledges the international dimension of unionization, labour unrest, work-