

## Editorial

THIS SPECIAL issue of the *Journal* marks the centennial of women's franchise in New Zealand. It brings together recent research on women's political activities and interests, mainly in the first half century of universal suffrage.

The last two years have seen a quantum leap in women's history in New Zealand. The centennial of the franchise has been the occasion for conference papers, articles, collections of essays, monographs and multi-authored books. This could not have occurred, however, without years of research and writing on which historians could draw for the new work.

For over twenty years, dating from the publication of Patricia Grimshaw's *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand* and W.B. Sutch's *Women with a Cause*, and influenced by the international historical literature, a small but growing number of historians have been researching issues that relate specifically to women and women's experiences in New Zealand. The lives of individual Maori and Pakeha women, their work (paid and unpaid), their ideas and values have been studied. Analysis of the role of women in immigration, in land use, in health, education, social reform and politics has begun. In some cases norms of behaviour have been inferred from research into the policies and practices that construct the deviant — the prostitute, the criminal, the delinquent, the 'bad' mother.

Nevertheless when, in 1989, I edited the first issue of the *Journal* devoted to women's history, the theme was simply women. The topics of the articles ranged widely, including the status of Maori women, women's crime, dress reform, adoption and women's work in wartime. It would have been difficult then to produce an issue focusing on one aspect of women's history. Four years later it is possible to publish a *Journal* containing six articles on women and politics.

Given the quantity of work that has now been published on women's history it has sometimes come as a surprise to hear commentators in 1993 say that we know little of the history of women in this country. Does this mean that historians have been talking to themselves? Or perhaps, even more distressing, that historians of women are read only by other historians of women? This surely can't be right. Publishers seek out books on women; such books sell well; they win national literary prizes. Their success has even caused some resentment.

The idea that we know little about the history of women is a relative one. We know vastly more than we did twenty years ago. Academic research is being incorporated into school curricula, survey courses in tertiary institutions, popular writing, radio and television programmes and films. Women, restored to the past by careful research, are now recognized names and, in a few cases, faces. This is no time however to sit back; there are many things we don't know, others

that we don't understand and probably much we need to re-interpret. Women's history has a full agenda in the foreseeable future.

A considerable amount of writing on women over the past few years, influenced in part by post-modernism, has focused on the idea of difference. Women's history, emerging out of the 'new' social history of the early-1960s and second-wave feminism of the late-1960s, was always concerned with the lives of 'different' women — working women, working-class women, immigrant women, women of different ethnicities, races and religions. Yet there was still an assumption that gender subsumed such differences; women might be located in different groups but they were still women and that provided a common experience. It set constraints that bound and united women. Self-conscious examination of difference exploded this idea. Woman became women.

The articles in this issue of the *Journal* do not set out explicitly to examine the idea of difference, but in reading them I was struck by how often difference and differences (in the sense of conflict) underlie the narratives and analysis. Angela Ballara's work uncovers more of the story of Maori women's involvement in Maori pan-tribal politics and sets this in the framework of their traditional status and power. It underlines the message, recently spelled out by several authors, that this country has two separate but parallel histories, as well as a third in which different peoples come together in an intersecting history. Barbara Brookes examines a little-explored area of legislative history connected to the suffrage, the political struggle over sexuality, which suffragists made a key to women's autonomy. The legal and social concept of *couverture*, by which women were made subject to male authority, first tackled in the contest for property rights, was again at stake in this series of political issues. Roberta Nicholls and Megan Hutching are concerned with the early National Council of Women and peace — a goal which created conflict within the Council and brought it into conflict with the wider society. Sandra Wallace has looked at the campaign promises of women candidates for Parliament and shows that, although women did not form a cohesive political group, they spoke to a particular women's political duty to work for women. Any consensus on what was best for women, however, seems to have been wrecked on the shoals of party politics. Melanie Nolan, examining the formulation of women's economic citizenship during the critical period of the 1930s depression, demonstrates further how class and politics affected women's rights as individuals and as workers.

The historians of women in New Zealand are a committed and productive group of scholars. I would like to thank them for making the country more intellectually interesting, for pushing out historical boundaries and for personal support. I would also like to thank the editors of the *Journal* for agreeing to a larger-than-usual issue, and Diana Holmes and Barbara Batt for patient, professional assistance in preparing this issue for publication.

RAEWYN DALZIEL