

Reviews

The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography: Volume one: 1769-1869. Allen & Unwin and Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington 1990, xviii, 674 pp. NZ price: \$130.00. ISBN 0-04-641052-X.

The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography: Volume two: 1870-1900. Bridget Williams Books and Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington 1993, xix, 664 pp. NZ price: \$130.00. ISBN 0-908912-49-8.

IT MAY BE useful to remind ourselves that dictionaries of biography are in practice essentially works of reference. They will be mined for facts, for information about past individuals or clusters of them. To whom was x married? Were y and z members of the same church or educated at the same school or in the same organization? Users will be many; readers few and far between.

Both tacitly and explicitly the DNZB manages to proclaim a purpose beyond this. Even stripped of its luxuriant wrappers it will sit on the shelves of the world's major reference libraries and manage to make its Australian, Canadian and American counterparts look crabbed, busy and inelegant, utilitarian. These volumes go beyond being mere information retrieval systems to make an aesthetic and a cultural statement. Indeed the editorial goal 'is not only to produce reliable reference texts but also to provide readers with an insight into the scope of New Zealand society'. There is a greater whole to which these individual lives are seen as contributing elements; fragments in the mosaic.

The selection of biographical subjects for inclusion has therefore had to have reference to this greater whole. While national eminence remained a criterion, subjects were also chosen for 'their standing within less extensive milieux, for their representativeness and for the balance their presence gives to the volume as a whole'. This representation and balance suggest, however approximate, some sort of template of society and culture which has been used in selection and which presumably changes as successive volumes move through time. Replicating that society's life in representative lives in a balanced way was always going to have to confront the obduracy, and to some extent the fortuity, of the archival record. The reference work's quest for authority in terms of archival validation has to do business with the desire for balanced representation of those groups and individuals who are, to coin a phrase, archivally disadvantaged. The editors are aware of this conundrum. 'Representative people often proved difficult to clothe with sufficient substance to enable them to survive to publication.' This seems, unfortunately, to have been especially true of women. Nevertheless, a reviewer is left with two criteria of evaluation: the DNZB's capacity to function as a work of reference and the insight into the changing society of historical New Zealand which it evokes.

As reference works, these two volumes should be seen in the context of the 4,500 or so biographical files which lie behind them and which will be available for scholarly use. But there is a sense in which publication of reference works in this form is now beginning

to look dated. The United Kingdom's *New Dictionary of National Biography* will be an electronic publication and those already familiar with the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* on CD-Rom will be aware that this represents a major qualitative enhancement of a reference tool. But these are the accidents of time in a fast changing field. Begun in 1983, the DNZB is without question the major collective project of New Zealand's historiographic community in the late twentieth century and it achieves a standard of excellence which reflects great credit on that community. I detect few editorial lapses.¹ The information given is clear and appropriate. The writing of individual entries achieves a consistently high standard and is sometimes exceptionally vivid, escaping the somewhat formulaic constraints of biographical dictionaries. The indices are helpful and extensive, the cross-referencing impressive. Purely as a reference the DNZB is already a notable achievement, a triumph for the collaborative effort which its editorial team, first under the guidance of Bill Oliver and then under Claudia Orange, have led.

If we look at the two volumes comparatively some interesting figures emerge.

	Volume I	Volume II
Contributors	287	422
Lives	588	617
Pages	674	664
Maori as % of total	27	14
Women as % of total	20	22
Maori women as % of Maori entries	13	19
Maori women as % of women entries	19	12
Politicians as % of total	14	20
Press as % of total	5	11

Entries are becoming more prolific (59 per decade in volume one; 206 per decade in volume two) but shorter. Maori are less well represented. Women maintain their level of underrepresentation. Maori women are better represented in the Maori sample; to a matching degree less well represented amongst the female cohort after 1870. Politicians and press both strikingly improve their representation. To what extent are these shifts accurate reflections of social change? To what extent do they arise out of the limitations of scholarship or archival constraints?

My impression culled from these volumes is of the shift from a society where fortune hung in the balance to one where the process of 'settlement' has taken on an inexorable quality and proceeds apace. The risks are beginning — at least for the colonist — to be calculable and hence the appearance of the insurance agent in the land (Volume two, A16). In Volume two 'administration' becomes 'public administration'. Factory, school and health inspectors — the agents of a regulated society — emerge. In the categories index 'Immigration and Settlement' absorbs 'Exploration'. Bankers, businesswomen, clerks, commission agents, exporters, undertakers, stock and station agents and asylum superintendents appear. The 'normalisation' of society enables deviance in its manifest

¹ Vol. 2, p.361, 1841 should read 1941; Vol. 2, K3, no author given; Rutland not Rutlandshire throughout; likewise County Durham not Durham when the county rather than the city is referred to.

forms to be identified and institutionalized. The number of architects rises from four to twenty between the two volumes — the work of many of the latter still informs the New Zealand townscape and provides conservationist symbols. Education witnesses the emergence of lecturers, administrators, principals and, that ever-reliable sign of the dulling of the intellect, university professors. Hospital matrons, superintendents, administrators; prison administrators; prohibitionists (nine of 11 of whom are women), all testify to a society after 1869 newly under governance, a land of administrators and administrative reformers. The longest entries in Volume one are those for Fox, Grey, Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki, and Riwha Titokowaru. By comparison those for Volume two are, in diminishing order of length, Seddon, Ward, Stout and then, about equal fourth, James Carroll, Sister Mary Aubert and Frances Hodgkins. Adventurers and warriors in conflict have given way to party bosses, political managers and the ameliorators of life in a raw but settled society.

Certainly the world of associations, boards, clubs, lodges and committees is much in evidence post-1869. The majority of these worthies are 'joiners'; bondlessness a state beyond their reach. Unlike the settlement of seventeenth-century New England as depicted by Roger Thompson,² late nineteenth-century settlement in this country was not by extended networks but by nucleated families or individuals for whom part of the process of settlement became the formation of associational networks and social institutions. In this respect, it might be worth noting Colin Matthew's intention that the *New Dictionary of National Biography* will include about 500 family entries and about 1,000 collective or prosopographical entries.

The 'native born' do not achieve pre-eminence in Volume two's representation of late-Victorian New Zealand society. Sixty-three per cent of the biographical subjects were born in the British Isles (39% in England). Only 23% were New Zealand born and of these the great majority were Maori. Women at 30% contribute a greater proportion of native born than of total entries. But overall the post-1869 picture is one of a society being shaped by a tide of settlement with a high degree of cultural homogeneity. Your best chance of getting into Volume two was to be British, male, acquire land as abundantly as possible, have some administrative or political acumen and join the right organizations. These need not be religious. Only 17% of entries show any conspicuous godliness. If you were a European woman, it was also advisable to join the Women's Christian Temperance Union (almost half the Pakeha women subjects were members). Whether all of these features 'represent' New Zealand society in the periods covered by the two volumes under review here, I must leave New Zealand historians to decide.

Perhaps even more impressionistically, there appears to be a change of style between the two volumes. In reading through Volume one, I was struck by the vividness with which individual character and circumstance could break through the constraints of the dictionary format. This surely owes a good deal to the skills of editors and contributors but does what I see as the slightly duller tone of Volume two reflect a society successfully struggling to settle down, establish its norms and assume the mantle of respectability?

COLIN DAVIS

University of East Anglia

² Roger Thompson, *Mobility and Migration: East Anglian Founders of New England 1629-40*, Amherst, 1994.