

Reviews

Nearly out of Heart and Hope: The Puzzle of a Colonial Labourer's Diary. By Miles Fairburn. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1995. 275pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 1-86940-118-2.

ONCE UPON A TIME when I was young graduate student I wrote an essay on Mahatma Gandhi which I divided into discrete narrative and analytical sections. My tutor was not amused. He told me, through a beard that would have been the pride of any nineteenth-century swagger, that such bifurcation suggested I was not in full control of my material. He insisted that both the story and analysis should be woven together. He believed that such integration was the essence of the historian's craft.

Miles Fairburn has ignored such concerns in his excellent new book so that he can unravel an intriguing paradox and, in the process, show off his mastery of sophisticated methodology. The problem is that by adopting this approach he may lose a large part of his would-be readership who will content themselves with the charming account of a fascinating life and give up on the dense and intensely academic second part. If this happens it would be a shame because Fairburn has written one of the most important pieces of social and cultural history yet to appear in this country.

Fairburn begins by discussing methodological problems, something he does better than most New Zealand historians. We have come to expect him to display an impressive range of reading and he does not disappoint even if he could have discussed the growing literature on construction of self a little more fully. He settles on a sensible mix of approaches combining a more traditional attention to hard structures with a fashionable examination of silences. He proceeds by setting up possible explanations of Cox's behaviour as hypotheses to be tested and works his way through them in methodical fashion.

This book is a much more satisfying read than *The Ideal Society and its Enemies* because Fairburn has rediscovered the light touch of his earlier articles. He has given up on the terse prose and hectoring tone of his first book, put away the sledge-hammer and replaced it with a crocheting hook with which he deftly unpicks many orthodoxies. The cover is eye-catching and AUP have done another excellent job of production, but unfortunately the limited set of photographs do not do justice to the fine prose. An excellent opportunity has been lost to demonstrate the grinding rhythms of rural work in visual as well as written form.

The delightful first part tells the story of a man who was very different from John A. Lee's 'working class athlete', or the archetypal rolling stone of the ballads of David McKee Wright. James Cox was the well-educated son of a Wiltshire tenant farmer and cousin of Richard Jefferies, the noted writer of English pastoral novels and evocative essays on the magic of the English countryside. Cox set off on an adolescent adventure with Jefferies and appears as a major character in one of his novels. After working as a

clerk in the Great Western railroad he came to New Zealand in 1880 at the relatively advanced age of 34. He seemed to lack the 'versatility' which Fairburn has shown was so essential for success in colonial New Zealand. After living in Christchurch Cox chose the life of a rural labourer, an occupation to which he appeared poorly suited.

Cox's massive diary of about 800,000 words begins in 1888 around the time he made the fateful decision to seek work in the North Island. He battled hard as an employee in one of the harshest of colonial industries: flax milling. Exhausting and dangerous as it was this work was more reliable than living on the swag. When the flax industry collapsed Cox spent his worst years, between 1892 and 1893, as a casual labourer in Hawke's Bay and the Wairarapa. Simply staying alive proved difficult and Cox became despondent. Things improved a little in 1894 when he found work with a Carterton agricultural contractor. He worked on traction engines harvesting grain until 1902. This was a harsh and unreliable form of work which was anything but romantic. Then he spent a long period doing odd jobs and gardening as his waning physical strength made it difficult to hold down heavier kinds of agricultural work. Finally, health problems drove the proud Cox to accept the pension in 1918 and he retired to The Carter Home. Ironically, these last years proved to be the best of his life as he indulged his love of gardening and reading. He was lucky that this was a relaxed and comfortable institution unlike the harsh Dickensian old men's homes run by the state. It provided him with some small compensation for his lifetime of arduous labour until his death in 1925.

Having told the story of this very ordinary life, Fairburn sets about trying to explain the puzzle of why this well-educated, hard working, honest and sober man failed so miserably in a supposed 'working man's paradise'. Fairburn also addresses such interesting questions as why Cox, who got on well with women, never increased his earning capacity by marrying. He does this by using Robert Darnton's technique of trawling through his key source with an increasingly fine net.

Fairburn begins this systematic inquiry by setting out the harsh reality confronting Cox. New Zealand's unreliable climate made work irregular and when this problem was combined with low wages it was difficult for Cox to accumulate savings. Liberal New Zealand is shown to have been anything but a paradise for unskilled, itinerant labourers. This is certainly one of the best pieces yet written on poverty in New Zealand, which emphasizes once again the very limited nature of Liberal welfare initiatives. Furthermore, labour reforms which also helped earn New Zealand the title of a 'social laboratory' apparently did not reach much beyond city limits and brought little help to Cox. Fairburn wonders if Cox was unusual but the reader is left with the feeling that many New Zealanders on low wages have long struggled to do little more than survive, and ended their days without savings or assets.

Fairburn moves from structures to the complex area of ideology. His account of the way in which the potent and pervasive Victorian ideology of self-help shut off opportunity for Cox is the best piece so far written in New Zealand on the way in which ideas influenced individual behaviour. Cox never realized that hard work and self-discipline were insufficient means of climbing out of the poverty trap. Once he recognized that failure was probably a permanent state from about 1893, he maintained the code as a way of ordering his life and reinforcing his sense of superiority over 'rough' workmen. It seems that ideology not only justified the success of winners in the social laboratory: it also shaped the actions of losers.

Fairburn then demonstrates that Cox was not insane or hopelessly incompetent. He finally settles on a complex sociological explanation which puts Cox's failure down to an interplay of hard economic structures, internalized ideologies, inappropriate coping mechanisms and plain bad luck.

This is, of course, only one reading. Marxists will be inclined to give greater weight to structures. Those influenced by the New Right's emphasis upon the centrality of the individual will rather see Cox as a no-hoper responsible for his own failings. Romantics will have him escaping some terrible dark secret involving Jefferies. Personally I find Fairburn's explanation convincing although I would have liked a little more investigation on why he never married, nor attempted to secure a leasehold. Other ideologies also acted upon him, especially the 'ruralism' which came from his own particular English background and impelled him towards life in the rural sector when he was clearly much better equipped to become a clerk, or perhaps an inspector, in the burgeoning Liberal bureaucracy. Even so I think Fairburn has got Cox about right.

The problem remains of representativeness. Fairburn steers around this difficulty although he does concede that structures were more important than he had earlier thought. One can detect a definite sidestep to the left in an historian noted for his critique of the soft pink colour of New Zealand historical writing. Although Cox was a rather unusual itinerant agricultural labourer my own research on John McKenzie's land settlement programme suggests that this kind of failure was probably rather more common than the powerful myth of widespread upwards social mobility in the rural sector suggests.

When I reviewed *The Ideal Society* I remarked that such path-breaking books only come along once in a blue moon. Fairburn has written something just as important in the space of a mere six harvest moons. To Fairburn's credit he cleverly avoids writing a long, self-conscious footnote to *The Ideal Society*, yet his new work complements and supplements the earlier work in all sorts of fascinating ways. The Cox diary does not 'prove' the 'atomization' thesis, but it does tell us much about the 'losers' who have been largely neglected in our historiography. Once again Fairburn has thrown down the gauntlet to New Zealand historians who are still locked into the comfortable Reevesian paradigm of relentless progress, improvement and widespread individual success. The expert telling of this sad tale brings both New Right and Old Left interpretations of our past into serious question.

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Building the New World: Work, Politics and Society in Caversham 1880s-1920s. By Erik Olssen. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1995. x + 297pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 1-86940-106-9.

IN THIS NEW BOOK Professor Olssen returns to a period, a place, a people and debates he knows well and has previously explored in exciting and innovative ways. Now the place is less the focus of the study than the site for the construction of an argument about relationships between, mainly, men, their work, politics and society. The methodologies that Olssen uses to uncover and analyse these relationships are wide ranging but a new one requires us to think of words and concepts 'not simply as words and concepts . . . but as multivalent symbols, clues to life as well as (proposed) fulcrums for reform'. He invites, therefore, not only a deconstruction of the texts created by the past but of the text presented here. The title of the book itself suggests the layers of meaning and practice that Olssen, the historian, has employed in creating his texts — hard, honest toil, skill and