

Correspondence

Dear Editors

MY UNDERSTANDING has always been that reviews in an academic journal should offer a peer assessment of published works. This presupposes a sound understanding of the subject area and an objectivity in the approach taken by the reviewer. Sadly, neither quality was evident in the review of *Safeguarding the Public Health* (April 1996).

Louella McCarthy devoted more than half the review to attacking the concept of commissioned history. Her remarks were largely based on David Cantor's contentious 1992 paper in the *Social History of Medicine*, the contents of which were misinterpreted and exaggerated. For example, she stated that 'unlike Cantor's reviled authors, Dow is a professional historian'. Flattering as this may be, it is entirely without foundation. The commissioned historians referred to by Cantor included Virginia Berridge, Lindsay Granshaw, Christopher Maggs, Ornella Moscucci and Frank Prochaska, all of whom are well known and widely published in medical history/social welfare in Britain.

Having derided many practitioners of commissioned medical history, McCarthy speculated on the background to my Health Department history. Claiming that 'Unless specified otherwise in the contract, commissioning bodies can direct the ultimate shape of the book', she implied that this might explain my approach to the health department history. In fact, I stated quite specifically (p.13) that 'Given the dearth of secondary sources and the continuing lack of case studies on the history of public health in New Zealand, this book inevitably concentrates on developments as seen from the centre'. Wittingly or otherwise, the reviewer distorted the sense of what I wrote.

She additionally stated: 'Perhaps it is true that the department's successor, the Ministry of Health, kept a remarkably firm hand on the production of the final form of the book'. Not only was this offensive to a professional historian, it also displayed a lack of knowledge about, or wilful disregard of, the role of the Historical Branch in New Zealand public history. The publication details appended to the review specified the book was published by 'Victoria University Press in association with the Ministry of Health'. The omission of the Branch, which is given equal prominence with the Ministry on the title page, was a major distortion, particularly since my acknowledgements make clear my indebtedness to the Branch historians.

McCarthy's biased approach was compounded by inaccuracies in her reading of my text. In accusing the department of having no more than a 'desultory interest' in school health during the nineteenth century it seemed to have escaped her notice that the department was not founded until 1900. Her accusation that I failed to discuss the department's supposed policy not to employ married women before 1967 was based on her misinterpretation of what I wrote about the department's first married director of nursing (p.180).

McCarthy, who is based at the University of New South Wales, signally failed to contribute anything to New Zealand history in her review. Should the Review Editor feel it necessary or desirable to go off-shore, authors should at least be accorded the courtesy of having their work assessed by academics working within their own field. In Australia, there are several historians — one of whom has been appointed specifically as a lecturer

in the history of medicine at Melbourne University — who could have given a professional and relevant opinion on the merits or otherwise of *Safeguarding*.

With regard to medical history in general, the decision to choose an overseas reviewer requires some explanation. New Zealand now has a pool of accomplished medical historians such as Michael Belgrave, Barbara Brookes, Warwick Brunton, Philippa Mein Smith, Geoffrey Rice and Margaret Tennant.

New Zealand historians depend upon the *Journal* as a reliable source of peer reviews. On the evidence presented here, I am concerned that the commissioning of reviews by inexperienced non-New Zealand historians may ultimately discredit and devalue what has been, and ought to be, the flagship publication of New Zealand history.

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