

*Easily the Best: The Life of Helen Connon 1857–1903*. By Margaret Lovell-Smith. Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 2004. 139 pp. NZ price: \$34.95. ISBN 1-877257-27-3.

HELEN CONNON, Canterbury's leading nineteenth-century woman academic and educationist, whose bust stands in three prominent Christchurch buildings and whose name was commemorated in the first residential hall at Canterbury College, has remained an elusive personality. She left few letters and no diaries. Silence, her biographer comments, was a consistent theme of her life. Yet there are sources for this life that researchers of other nineteenth-century women graduates can only envy. The events of her life are not in dispute. The first woman student to enrol at Canterbury College and the first in the British Empire to gain an MA, she was principal of Christchurch Girls' High School for 12 years, and married John Macmillan Brown, charismatic founding professor at Canterbury College. Within a year or so of her death, her life was written by her former pupil and friend, the novelist Edith Grossman. She appears in the memoirs of her husband and her daughter, has a place in the history of the University of Canterbury and an entry in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*.

Margaret Lovell-Smith has utilized these sources judiciously and added information from school records, former pupils and the descendants of the two Macmillan Brown daughters. Generally her chapter organization mirrors that of Grossman, because Connon's life falls neatly into segments on study, teaching, family and travel. Lovell-Smith's first chapter, 'Following the Gold Trail', however, breaks quite new ground. Whereas Grossman used her opening chapter to highlight the advancement of women in New Zealand, Lovell-Smith has pieced together the story of Helen's early family life, from the time her parents — her father was a carpenter — emigrated to Melbourne in 1854, on to the goldmining town of Castlemaine, and in 1863 across the Tasman to Dunedin, and then Hokitika, where they stayed eight years. Everywhere Helen's academic brilliance was recognized by her teachers; the title of the book is a translation of 'facile princeps', inscribed on her prize from the Hokitika Academy.

In 1874 the family moved to Christchurch where Helen was accepted by Professor Macmillan Brown as a student at Canterbury College. For seven years, from 1875 until her graduation MA with first class honours in 1881, she was 'the idol of the College', admired by men and women alike. She began teaching at the new Christchurch Girls' High School while still a student and in 1883, aged 25, she became its principal. Grossman gives a vivid account of Helen Connon's 'life's work' and Lovell-Smith supplements this with school and Board of Governors records and reminiscences, especially from the school's jubilee publication. 'We adored her', wrote Grossman, and all the others echo the tone, describing her serenity, beauty and dedication. As well as herself teaching, she had 'absolute control' of her staff — she liked to take them as part-time students and mould them to her style — visiting all the classrooms, viewing every exam paper and supplementing lessons in subjects she thought were inadequately taught. To her 'special girls', the scholarship candidates, she gave extra tuition outside school hours and in the holidays. Even on her wedding day she took time to go over a pupil's scholarship paper with her. The academic achievements of the school under her leadership and the later careers of her pupils are impressive. At the annual break-up ceremonies she sat on stage, the centre of attention, quite silent. (This is in striking contrast to the practice of another notable principal of the day, Caroline Freeman, who used the break-up ceremony to elaborate on her philosophy of education.)

At the end of 1886, Helen Connon married John Macmillan Brown, according to Grossman a 'rare union of mind and mind'. Others have suggested, less generously, that Macmillan Brown subdued his young wife to his will, but Lovell-Smith believes the marriage was an affectionate one. Helen continued as principal after her marriage, a most

unusual concession almost certainly negotiated by her influential fiancé. The couple set up house, with appropriate staff, on a five acre property in Fendalton, where Millicent was born in January 1888, just three weeks before school began. Despite her excellent health, the strain of fulfilling the duties of wife, mother and mistress of a busy household was telling on Helen by 1892. She took leave and the couple travelled to England for some months. In 1894 she resigned from the school and later that year bore a stillborn child.

Macmillan Brown also resigned, on health grounds, in 1895 and thereafter much of the couple's time was given to a search for health — both were insomniacs — and to travel. They visited Britain and the Continent twice more, the second time taking their two daughters (Viola was born in 1897) and a nurse/governess, for almost two years. During this trip, Helen suffered a miscarriage and her continuing ill-health after they returned home (Millicent wrote) made her father impatient and irritable. Already unwell when the family set off for a North Island holiday in early 1903, Helen became ill in Rotorua and died there on 3 February. The feminist Grossman blamed her premature death on the impossibility of combining career and marriage in a colonial environment (although she had resigned from Christchurch Girls' almost a decade earlier). Lovell-Smith asks whether married life had 'inflicted on her a gradual but inexorable decline as a result of her husband's strong and egocentric personality', but rejects this view because of the strength and determination Helen displayed in other parts of her life. Instead she blames the health services of the day, the insomnia never properly dealt with and the miscarriage, from which she never recovered.

This balanced and eminently readable biography is attractively illustrated and well referenced. By giving life to an outstanding but reticent woman, it provides valuable new insights into girls' education and academic marriage in late Victorian New Zealand.

DOROTHY PAGE

*Dunedin*

*Making Waves: Captain Jock McGregor — Shipmaster, Wanganui Pioneer.* By Felicity Campbell. Steele Roberts, Wellington, 2004. 272 pp. NZ price: \$44.95. ISBN 8-77338-27-3.

JOCK MCGREGOR'S leap from a cliff top into the Whanganui River narrowly averting death from a determined and armed taua is a well-known drama from Wanganui's early history. But until now, not a lot more was generally known about him.

Although this doughty Scot, a great-grandson of Rob Roy McGregor, left few papers, Felicity Campbell (herself a direct descendant of an early Wanganui family) has pieced together an engaging life of a remarkable man. Campbell fills out McGregor's portrait by researching and detailing the key local and national histories that framed McGregor's bold and enterprising activities. And she indulges in some imaginative reconstructions that, rooted in fact, add credible lustre to her account. It is not so different from the technique employed by James Belich in his *Titokowaru's War*.

McGregor bears so many of the traits and experiences of those who left poor families in their homelands, in this case Cherry Bank, near Perth, Scotland, for the uncertain opportunities of New Zealand in the 1830s, he could almost be drawn from fiction. His experience can be summed up in the cliché, 'Fortune favours the brave'.

The 22-year-old Jock was ranging across the Tasman from Launceston in whaling enterprises before 1835, then he settled at Port William, Stewart Island, where he built a raupo house. By 1840 he had taken as his wife Hinekawa, daughter of Tutepourangi,