

beautiful. New Zealand's long-run rate of economic growth over the twentieth century has not matched most of its larger industrialized trading partners. In the long run, scale and scope contribute to productivity improvements and ultimately higher sustainable growth. Nations that depend too much on small enterprises, uncritically celebrate and use governments to protect and support those enterprises grow more slowly. That this book has evoked such far-reaching observations attests to its importance.

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'Ready Money': *The Life of William Robinson of Hill River, South Australia and Cheviot Hills, North Canterbury*. By Margaret Wigley. Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 2006. 421 pp. NZ price: \$50.00. ISBN 1-877257-42-7; *Ngamatea. The Land and the People*. By Hazel Riseborough. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2006, 304 pp. NZ price: \$50.00. ISBN 1-86940-369-X.

IN 2006 FOUR QUITE DIFFERENT BOOKS WERE PUBLISHED on New Zealand's agricultural and rural past. Gordon McLauchlan's *The Farming of New Zealand* is a general history of farming from the beginning of Polynesian settlement to the present day. Richard Wolfe published a surprisingly thorough history of *Ovis aries* in this country, considering the title of his book is *A Short History of Sheep in New Zealand*. Of the two books reviewed here one concerns the life and times of one of the great pastoralists, while the other fits into a long tradition of station histories.

William 'Ready Money' Robinson was one of the most successful pastoralists in the South Island in the nineteenth century. In his lifetime he was famous for being one of the wealthiest men in the country. However, Robinson's real legacy was that his estate, Cheviot Hills, was the shining early success in the Liberal government's policy of 'bursting up' the great estates. The government purchased Cheviot Hills in 1892, three years after Robinson's death. According to William Pember Reeves the trustees misplayed their hand in their dealings with the government and lost the estate. Reeves's spin was that the trustees disputed the government valuation of the property for taxation purposes, set at £300,000, and challenged the government to buy it at their own valuation of £260,000. '[John] McKenzie [Minister of Lands]', he wrote, 'was just the man to pick up the gauntlet thus thrown down.' He bought the station and within a year, and in time for the 1893 election, Cheviot Hills was surveyed, subdivided, roaded and partly settled.

In *A Pastoral Kingdom Divided, Cheviot, 1889-1894* W.J. Gardner disputed this account and concluded that Cheviot Hills was beset by family tensions, legal tangles, heavy debt, taxation disputes and management problems. Moreover, F.H.D. Bell, who acted on behalf of the family and who was married to Robinson's daughter Caroline, had political aspirations and his association with such a large estate was a liability. According to Gardner, the family sold Cheviot to the government to solve the problems of the estate itself. Surprisingly, in a book that at times almost gets bogged down with minutiae, Margaret Wigley gives this episode four paragraphs, noting that the 'history of the subdivision has been amply covered in other books' (p.375).

Wigley, a great-granddaughter of William Robinson, has written a detailed narrative of this hard-nosed, self-made man's life. Like so many others, Robinson does not fit the stereotype that Canterbury's pastoralists were from the landed gentry. He was the son of a tenant farmer from southern Lancashire. Robinson was 25 when he made the decision to emigrate and the characteristics that made him such a success were formed by that time. Wigley surmises that his determination to do business in cash came from

his experience of the Scottish drovers who passed through his home district taking their cattle to markets in the south and who sold only for 'ready money'. Robinson had acquired the sobriquet 'Ready Money' long before he arrived in New Zealand. His passion for horse racing might well have developed here too, as the famous Aintree racecourse was only five miles from his home.

Robinson migrated to South Australia in 1839 and made his pile driving stock overland from New South Wales. He invested the profits in land and stock, and when gold was discovered in Victoria in 1851 he was able to take advantage of the surge in prices for livestock and crops. Indeed, the whole economy boomed, as did the price of land. In 1856 Robinson sold the lease of Hill River Station and its stock for £60,000, receiving an initial down payment of £10,500 in cash.

With this 'ready money' he began to freehold Cheviot Hills from under the lease holder, J.S. Caverhill in 1857. By 1888 the property consisted of 84,978 acres of freehold land, purchased at the cost of £31,455, and was the second most valuable estate in Canterbury behind G.H. Moore's Glenmark. Once he had established the station Robinson left the day-to-day affairs to capable managers. Like several other successful runholders he was active in political affairs and served in the Legislative Council from 1869 to 1889.

'Ready Money' Robinson was a fascinating character and Wigley tells his story in great detail. The author has done a tremendous amount of research and the text is accompanied by useful maps and an excellent selection of photographs. However, at times there is too much needless information. We learn that on their trip back to England the Robinsons bought a Copeland dinner service, pattern number D3594 and ordered a dessert service, pattern D3553 (p.183). There are lengthy accounts of the death of John Horrocks, an acquaintance of Robinson, and of the financial crisis and death of the painter S.T. Gill. Both are tangential to the story.

Less detail and more depth would have made the work more valuable. William Robinson was clearly passionate about his estate, yet farming activities get perfunctory treatment. More troubling is that after 386 pages William Robinson's character remains enigmatic. One reviewer thought that the book tended 'towards hagiography', which is a little harsh; although Wigley certainly tends to focus on Robinson's successes. His indulgence in horse racing is well covered, but the heavy debts that this incurred are not. His freeholding attack on Stonyhurst, the neighbouring property, shows that Robinson was unscrupulous when it came to business. His butler, Simon Cedeno, wanted to kill him after Robinson abused him in front of guests, calling him a 'black nigger with a black heart' (Cedeno later stabbed to death one of the servant girls, Maggie Burke). Gardner acknowledged that Robinson was not a popular figure; Wigley glides around this. So while Wigley succeeds in describing the life and times of William Robinson, she fails to grip with the man himself.

The big stations of the South Island, like Cheviot Hills, have a particular fascination for many New Zealanders and there have been numerous books about them. Mona Anderson, Peter Newton and David McLeod are among the authors of popular histories about some of the great runs and the characters who worked on them. North Island stations have not received the same coverage, so Hazel Riseborough's *Ngamatea: The Land and its People* is a welcome addition.

Ngamatea lies in the high country of the central North Island, surrounded by the Kaimanawa, Kaweka and Ruahine ranges, and took in a huge spread of country (sheep were run on more than 250,000 acres). The Crown resumed control of parts of the station over the years, and in 1972 the Roberts family split the place. Now Ngamatea is a mere 70,000 acres, although nearly a third of that is highly productive grassland.

Riseborough conducted over 60 interviews to gather the material for this book and she has tried to tell the story in the idiom of the people who told it to her. Consequently it is a collection of yarns linked together by her text, and it works well. It is full of some

wonderfully eccentric characters and some of it is laugh-out-loud funny. Drummond Fernie, one of the owners in the 1930s, liked to deal in cash and in town carried a sugar sack full of money over his shoulder. When they began cultivating some of the better country, sowing green feed and permanent pasture, someone asked Drummond how his swedes were doing. 'They're cooeeing to each other', he replied. It was obviously a thin crop.

For much of its history Ngamatea was a remote and difficult place to manage and life was pretty tough. The homestead was made up of three whare knocked together, with a room or two added later. A diesel generator provided some power until a hydro plant was put in in the early 1950s. Access was difficult so the stores for the homestead and cookhouses did not come in very often, and when they did it was by the truckload: a ton of flour, half a ton of sugar, two tons of potatoes, tea in 100lb chests, and plenty of tobacco.

None of the early owners could make the place pay and even the Fernie–Roberts partnership struggled. When Lawrence Roberts died in 1966, after nearly 30 years on Ngamatea, the station was struggling. Things were so tough that the new manager, Ray Birdsall, used his own chequebook to pay for the plant and machinery that he needed to run the station. Birdsall began a development programme that in time changed Ngamatea from a relatively low-cost grazing run relying solely on fine wool for its income to an intensively farmed property producing prime lambs wool, cattle and deer.

Ngamatea was a great sprawling station and this is a great sprawling story. Riseborough does well to hold it together. A good selection of photographs accompanies the text and there are excellent maps. However, the first detailed map, facing page 88, would have been better at the front of the book to help make sense of the geography of the place and the numerous place names mentioned. Like Wigley, Riseborough tends to pull her punches when dealing with some of her leading characters. Lawrence Roberts, for all his wonderfully dry wit, seemed to be a difficult customer and his daughter Margaret, who took over Ngamatea after he died, appeared to follow her father. There were clearly some 'issues' around Phil Mahoney who managed Ngamatea from 1978 to 1990. Riseborough skirts around these.

Both Wigley and Riseborough have written highly readable and informative books. There are interesting contrasts in the writing styles of the authors and in the subject matter of the two stories. By the nature of the country it took in, Cheviot Hills was a good property and Robinson had the money and will to make it a great station. Ngamatea was a long hard battle that came good in the end, largely due to Margaret Roberts and the team she gathered about her. Both stories are worth the telling.

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Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand

Family Silver: From the Provinces to Privatisation — A Personal Journey. By Richard Shallcrass. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2006. 231 pp. NZ price: \$29.95. ISBN 0-86473-533-2.

HISTORIANS DRAW ON WRITTEN ARCHIVES and on the recollections and opinions of participant observers. Sometimes the latter are interviewed and sometimes they write memoirs. Recently there have been several memoirs by public servants intimately involved in New Zealand's tumultuous foreign policy and economic reforms during the latter half of the twentieth century. The best is undoubtedly Gerald Hensley's *Final*