

OBITUARY

W.H. OLIVER, 14 MAY 1925 – 16 SEPTEMBER 2015



Emeritus Professor W.H. Oliver died in Wellington on 16 September 2015. Bill, as he was known to friends and colleagues, was one of New Zealand's foremost historians: a social commentator, biographer, poet and writer of prose characterized by elegance, sagacity and style.

Born in Feilding in 1925 into family circumstances where education was both a rarity and a privilege, he eventually completed a PhD on British trade union history at Oxford before returning to New Zealand. Professor Oliver's career can be divided into three stages, and in each he generated a landmark piece of historical work, among many others. The first stage, with which his *Story of New Zealand* (1960) was associated, saw him lecturing at Canterbury and Victoria Universities. The second took him to Massey University as Foundation Professor of History in 1964. Massey was then making a transition from an agricultural college to a fully fledged university, and as first Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and member of Council Bill Oliver made a major contribution to the collegial life of the University. But he was certainly no narrow administrator, and as editor of the journal *Comment*, contributor to Vietnam war teach-ins, and public lecturer, he established his reputation as a social commentator – one whose knowledge of the past made him all the better informed to comment upon current issues. At Massey, his blend of quiet guidance and inspiration fostered a generation of postgraduate students.

This second, Massey-based stage in Bill Oliver's career was marked by major publications, including a biography of James K. Baxter and the editorship of the *Oxford History of New Zealand* (1981). The latter, in particular, was an enormous project which brought together the efforts of established New Zealand historians and those of a younger generation. It drew upon a huge mass of new thesis research on Māori and on Pākehā and was, in itself, a statement that New Zealand's history could no longer adequately be contained within the covers of the short, single-volumed, single-authored history.

The *Oxford History* prepared Bill for a major career shift over 1983. He left the confines of the university and took up the editorship of the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, a project which drew upon his undoubted skills of consultation, and his wide contacts within the historical community. Looking

at the polished, authoritative volumes produced under his editorship, and that of his successor Claudia Orange, it is hard to appreciate the monumental task that underlay the establishment of the Dictionary Unit. Bill had to start from scratch and train up specialized researchers and editors, oversee complex computer and data entry systems, and liaise with Māori and other community groups. He had to establish standards to which the thousand and more individuals who have written for the *Dictionary* could write – and these writers included academics and non-academics, history enthusiasts and descendants of persons chosen for entries, people who had written professionally before and people who had not. He also had to cement in place funding and political support for the Dictionary Unit and its products – he said that politicians' enthusiasm sometimes waned just a little when they learned that you had to actually be dead to get into the *Dictionary*!

Over the 1990s and 2000s Bill continued as a practising historian. He produced a history of claims to the Waitangi Tribunal and himself gave evidence before the Tribunal. He acted as consultant for the Crown Forestry Rental Trust. He continued to play a vital role as a senior figure in the historical profession, monitoring and maintaining standards within public and academic history contexts, and commenting upon the discipline. In 2002 he produced *Looking for the Phoenix: A Memoir*. In recognition of his work he was awarded a CBE in 1990 and a Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement in 2008.

Other historians may have been more forward over the years in seeking out personal publicity, but few could equal Bill's breadth of achievement. Equally important, few can have played such a vital role in promoting and fostering the work of others and sparking new endeavours. This work was carried on quietly within and, even more vitally, outside the walls of academia. It was done with wisdom, modesty and good humour, and inspired affection, admiration and gratitude from many.

MARGARET TENNANT

Massey University

REFLECTIONS OF A FORMER STUDENT

W.H. Oliver was first known to me, along with many thousands of other secondary school students, as the author of the 1968 Heinemann booklet *Further Steps towards a Welfare State since 1935*, read in our School Certificate year.¹ But it was in the fifth-floor seminar room at the north end of the Social Science Tower at Massey University in 1977 that I came to know W.H. Oliver in person. In that space ‘the Prof’ as we called him, out of affection as much as deference, would sit at one end of the long table presiding over the Honours seminar ‘New Zealand Social History, c.1880s–1920s’.

And it was there that the magic of History – the enchantment of ideas, of research, of argument, of nuance and creativity in the footnotes, and fluency in the text – unfolded, becoming for a number of us a lifetime drug. The actual drugs were the sweetly spiced fragrance of the Prof’s pipe tobacco wisping towards the ceiling, and the slightly acrid brews made using an enamel electric jug perched on the window ledge and small expensive tins of Nescafé (which we students purchased).

Like all good Honours students we were required to write 10,000-word research essays based, to some degree at least, on original research. Our interests ranged widely but many concentrated on that late-nineteenth-century Liberal decade and its denouement into arbitration, conservatism, 1913 and ultimately the Massey-Reform ascendancy. Aspects of prohibition and drunkenness in Wanganui, 1880 to 1920; enthusiasm for the Boer War in Feilding and Rangitikei, 1899–1902; women and crime in New Zealand society, 1888–1910; the Trades and Labour Councils (1891–1911); Mrs Grace Neill in the Department of Asylums, Hospitals and Charitable Institutions; social aspects of rugby football in Manawatū from 1878 to 1910, are among the topics of studies produced under Bill’s guidance. They included works that were to prove influential in research taken up by Peter Gibbons, Tom Brooking, Valerie Smith, John Stenhouse and Margaret Tennant.

Those of us fortunate enough to be Bill’s students benefited from his great gifts and generosity as a teacher. We caught the contagion of research, of enquiry, of thinking carefully and using words in the best possible way: all things that Bill did rather than ever needing to talk abstractedly about the doing of them. Reflecting on how he achieved this is to recall Bill’s way of providing a few suggestions here, a possible hint there, giving a few co-ordinates to follow, but more importantly, drawing us into an engagement with ideas. It was not that his enquiry became ours, but rather that he had an intent: he noticed our interests (many of which were ones he shared) and then

gathered them into a general project in which we were all working to an end. The Prof's willingness to ask questions, and even sometimes not know the answer, in our presence was wonderful, perhaps the key.

In his 2002 memoir *Looking for the Phoenix*, Bill described the process of memory, of history-making, with the observation 'Memories are shaped and made intelligible only within the perspective of a present need to understand them. The past we recover is the past the present tells us to take an interest in.'² In the late 1970s, the world of History that Bill was introducing to us was the exciting world of social history – the expanding field that grew from the Annales School; from E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*, in which culture came to count within Marxian categories (beliefs – along with work – might shape lives); from the new social history of Thernstrom, Katz and the North American schools;³ from Gramsci, Althusser, the Birmingham School and the data crunchers. Who – and what – counted as History was undergoing a profound revolution. Bill was excited by that, and allowed us into that excitement, giving us the means to take it somewhere. It was also a time of active political ferment in New Zealand. He was also showing us how the world of history, written from Palmerston North, could come from circumstances that were at once local, particular and 'of the historian' (research interests often being linked to our interests) while also being international, global and detached. Bill expected us – and himself also, I came to realize – to be part of this world. And he expected that we would want to do as good work as possible. To do that he allowed a level of uncertainty, anxiety, insecurity into our deliberations. This was also one of his ingredients. It was evident in those moments of confiding (vividly remembered by all who were his students), when the Prof, recalling a student essay from an earlier year, would summarize the questions that had been asked and conclusions reached, and – brow furrowed slightly, breath drawn in a bit more firmly than usual, pipe puffed a contemplative minute or two – would remark, compassionately but clearly, that the study 'hadn't been entirely satisfactory', or that, perhaps 'further questions could be asked'. Secretly, each of us around that long table, were thinking we would produce something better, imagining ourselves to be the subjects of less qualified judgements offered by the Prof to our successors. We basked for a short while in this prospect. By the time class had finished and we'd sloped down to the bike rack in the lower car park, we knew that we'd probably be amongst those who also came up a little short. It wasn't that Bill lacked faith. Quite the opposite. He had inspired us to go off in all sorts of (to me now) unlikely directions and efforts, but he had also – *was* also – indicating that all answers were provisional. Questioning was good, and was itself part of what it was

about: finding answers was not always necessarily going to be the result, and certainly might often not lead to certainty, to simple or positive assertions.

Bill's habits and power as a teacher did not stop when he left Massey and came to Wellington and the DNZB in 1983. He continued, almost seamlessly, in the same way – reading drafts, listening to other people's ideas, applying his critical, incisive, constructive pen to the margins of pages.

An obituary exists as a genre of memory and history. Bill noted the living paradox of such an enterprise in writing of his father: 'Memory takes many forms. Some of what we remember may come from our own and others' observation, some from more impersonal sources. But this distinction is not a sharp one and, when it is a matter of the life of a known and loved person, not a real one. For the mind is an active agent; the artefact it composes is woven from a random assemblage of recollections, echoes of recollections, guesses transformed into recollections, imagined happenings imperceptibly made real, scraps of written and printed paper, faded and discoloured photographs, newspaper clippings and materials preserved in libraries and archival collections. ... the kinds of truth contained in memories are varied and various, but they are all truths of a kind.'⁴ They are words we can take in remembering W.H. Oliver, a scholar, historian, poet and generous teacher and colleague who inspired many to embark on a life of the mind, to explore beyond the boundaries of the known. I count myself very fortunate to have been one of those people.

CHARLOTTE MACDONALD

Victoria University of Wellington

NOTES

- 1 W.H. Oliver, *Further Steps towards a Welfare State since 1935*, Auckland, 1968.
- 2 W.H. Oliver, *Looking for the Phoenix: A Memoir*, Wellington, 2002, p.53.
- 3 In particular through the work of Stephan Thernstrom, *Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880–1970*, Cambridge, MA, 1973 (and his earlier *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City*, Cambridge, MA, 1964); Michael B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth-Century City*, Cambridge, MA, 1975 (and his later *Poverty and Policy in American History*, Cambridge, MA, 1983).
- 4 Oliver, *Looking for the Phoenix*, p.2.