

William Pember Reeves, New Zealand Fabian. By Keith Sinclair. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965. 356 pp. U.K. price: 42s.

IT IS not difficult to understand why William Pember Reeves became for most New Zealanders largely a figure of legend. His meteoric emergence from political obscurity, the brief, brilliant period of achievement, his abrupt disappearance from the New Zealand scene—all this has tended to set him apart from the ordinary breed of politicians who have to grow old and accommodate to new situations and see once bright reputations corroded by time and circumstance. With Reeves there was a single era, a single, solid body of achievement, and then no more. Later in his life the legend was added to by his becoming for New Zealanders an authoritative but disembodied voice, speaking from outside, pronouncing on the nature of their country's development. But now Professor Sinclair presents the substance and continuity of Reeves's life, and effectively replaces the legend with the man himself.

One hopes that a precedent has been established here, for New Zealand historical writing is still seriously lacking in scholarly biographical studies, and too many prominent political figures continue to have reputations derived mainly from myth. Certainly New Zealand biographers could do much worse than adopt as their model Professor Sinclair's lucid, unaggressive style and study the art concealing art by which he enables the reader to make contact with Reeves's personality and activity. But, in spite of a considerable degree of self-effacement on the part of the author, this is no mere work of cold, 'scientific' biography. One is aware of a real imaginative sympathy that derives perhaps partly from the fact that one poet, historian, and New Zealander is writing about another.

The author's treatment of his subject is mainly New Zealand-centred. Reeves emerges, not as an English intellectual who happened to have had a brief political career in New Zealand, but as a New Zealander who happened to associate with English Fabians in later life and largely because he was attuned through his New Zealand experience to the idea of the state's playing a considerable role in national life. The least satisfactory part of the book is perhaps the account of Reeves's involvement in English Fabianism. The sources used here—letters to and from New Zealand, and reports on his activities in the New Zealand press, for example—reinforce the impression of a predominantly New Zealand point of view. Professor Sinclair quotes from Reeves's own reminiscences. These show an abiding attachment to his own country, but they are also poignant testimonies to the divided nature of Reeves's existence. For they were written in England late in his life, and the emphasis in them on the loneliness and desolation and 'stony plains' of the New Zealand scene as compared with the 'meadows' of England seems to reflect Reeves's own sense of alienation from the living reality of New Zealand. Professor Sinclair does not explain completely satisfactorily why Reeves did become a man of two worlds. The political explanation appears to predominate, but is that enough? Some wider consideration of the Anglo-New Zealand connection and the extent to which a New Zealand national feeling had yet emerged might not have come amiss here. Reeves's interest in schemes for strengthening the links between Britain and the Empire does seem to express a desire to bring together his own two worlds and re-create an organic unity out of his own disrupted life.

Reeves appears as frequently at odds with the predominant forces in the social and political context within which he worked. Professor Sinclair's

account suggests strongly that Reeves's extremely unaccommodating temperament may have had much to do with this, that Reeves was almost incapable of fitting comfortably into *any* context. The author shows how often there appears in the fabric of nineteenth-century New Zealand politics 'the thread of business enterprise, of profit, often twisting into dishonesty'. Reeves's intellectualism and his desire to establish a sense of national good were bound to conflict with the spirit of land and business speculation. Except when depression temporarily created a protective, defensive attitude, New Zealand remained a frontier society whose way of life was expected to be characterised by fluidity, expansion, speculation. In such a society the attempt to establish a sense of overriding national good must always be difficult, and Reeves's policies, in so far as they depended on such a sense and at the same time implied the hardened existence of classes in New Zealand and the necessity of institutionalising and further defining them for the purpose of resolving conflicts between them, were not likely to appeal for long. New Zealanders were accustomed to the state's playing an active role, but as the source of aid for development and expansion rather than of the restoration of balance within a static, non-fluid social situation. It is not surprising that Reeves's view of the state did ultimately carry him from New Zealand Liberalism to English Fabianism.

There will be much interest in Professor Sinclair's discussion of Reeves's political thinking. He dismisses as anachronistic suggestions that an element of 'fascism' was present in this thinking. One must regret, however, that in the process of doing so he does appear to fasten on to Willis Airey the quite undeserved label of 'dogmatic Marxist'. In fact, there is not much in the politics of the Western world at the time which cannot be, and has not been, with the benefit of hindsight described as potentially 'fascist'. There is, surely, no profit now in pursuing further this mode of analysis. On the other hand, one may feel that Professor Sinclair does tend to read too much socialism into Reeves's ideas. There is a case for seeing Reeves as a conservative of a kind which *was* present in the politics of his own day. In some respects, for instance, he is a middle-class 'radical' of the Chamberlain type, that is, inclined to use language which appeared frightening at the time to the propertied classes yet can now be seen as designed to shock them into appreciating the necessity of making concessions in order to safeguard their fundamental interest, security in the possession of their property. Reeves seems to have practised what was essentially an enlightened conservatism. How else *can* one describe the aim of ending strikes and class warfare through the creation of state machinery for conciliation and arbitration? Whether or not he hoped, as the author indicates that he did, that the capitalist system would ultimately disappear, his policies could certainly only have the effect in the short run of helping to preserve it. In so far as they increased social and industrial stability, they were clearly to the advantage of employers, as Reeves indeed tried to tell the employers. He also said that he wanted to end class, and yet the arbitration system seemed to harden class division. Much obviously depended on the extent to which, through such a system and through the development of the power of the state, the idea of a greater national good could be established.

In fact, for all his references to foreign theorists, Reeves's ideas on capitalism do seem to have been derived primarily from an awareness of the difficulties of his own country. For what were his main objections to capitalism? Professor Sinclair tells us that Reeves was an observer of poverty, but how or where is not made clear. What really worried Reeves

was the unstabilising effect on society of capitalism's recurrent 'crises and panics'. The state must act, above all, to counter this dangerous 'commercial anarchy'. The relevance of this to the New Zealand situation is obvious. In invoking the power of the state, Reeves was concerned to protect a society especially vulnerable to the 'crises and panics' of capitalism through the dependence of its economy on overseas markets. And he concentrated on helping the most precariously placed of all New Zealanders, the urban working people.

Close study of Reeves's career can tell us a great deal about the nature of New Zealand politics and society. Professor Sinclair has told the story very well, and his book will surely come to represent a milestone in the New Zealand historical writing.

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