

*Women's Suffrage in New Zealand.* By Patricia Grimshaw. Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, 1972. xx, 151 pp. N.Z. price: \$5.25.

1972 WAS a good year for New Zealand feminists. It began with the visit of Germaine Greer, saw the publication of a book of New Zealand's suffrage movement, and finished with the passing of an equal pay bill. That Patricia Grimshaw's book, *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand*, a scholarly piece of historical research, should have reached the best seller lists is a reflection of the interest in women's history generated by the women's liberation movement.

New Zealand was the first country in the world to give women the vote for a national parliament. The surprising thing about this was not that it was early but that it took so long. Educational opportunities had come relatively easily for girls in New Zealand — the first woman graduate BA in 1877, a year before London University opened its degrees to women. Women voted for municipal corporations from 1867, school committees from 1877, licensing committees from 1881 and hospital and charitable aid boards from 1885. The first bill containing a clause allowing women ratepayers to vote in general elections passed through Parliament in 1878 and was dropped only because of a side issue connected with Maori voting rights.

It was to be another fifteen years before New Zealand women finally got the vote. The question Mrs Grimshaw asks is why, after such a promising start, did it take so long for a bill to pass Parliament and why did certain M.P.s oppose the franchise? The answer seems to be simply that while a majority in Parliament and the country thought that the women should get the vote, the opponents in Parliament were better organized at crucial times and that groups at both ends of the political spectrum feared the results of the franchise on their own party. Politics, it is shown, were all important in the struggle. Some of the Conservatives opposed the vote for women because they feared it would be cast for the Liberals; some of the Liberals, in particular Seddon and other members of the Liberal cabinet, feared the opposite. Having won power in 1890 the Liberals wanted to retain it. Afraid of the power of the pro-suffragists both within and outside their party, they condoned the introduction of suffrage bills but tried clandestinely to prevent their passage through the House of Representatives or relied on the Legislative Council to throw them out. In 1893 both methods failed them. Events after the granting of the vote showed that the fears of the Liberal leaders were not justified. The common story that women voted as their husbands is not proven but they certainly did not vote *en bloc* for the Conservatives.

The politics of the franchise brought forward a new force — the women. In this respect Mrs Grimshaw's book has illuminated a murky picture. Little attention has been paid by historians, except W. P. Reeves, himself a participant and on the receiving end of the exhortations of his feminist wife, to the actual franchise movement in New Zealand. Because of its association with the Women's Christian Temperance Union it has frequently been dismissed as a mere adjunct to the agitation for prohibition. It is clear now however that New Zealand had a large and active suffragist movement in touch with suffragists overseas. It was not a brick-throwing, pillar-box firing, picture-slashing organization — there was too little opposition for that. Nevertheless it was a grass roots movement with support ranging from

middle class housewives, university graduates and trade unionists to frustrated eccentrics. Its members organized meetings, made speeches, collected signatures for giant petitions, pressurised M.P.s, wrote to local newspapers and packed the Visitor's Gallery when suffrage bills were being debated. All this was done on a shoe-string budget — in 1890 the national convention granted its departments of Franchise, Scientific Temperance Instruction, Young Women's Work and Social Purity the sum of 10/- each for the year's work!

Kate Sheppard emerges as the clear leader of the New Zealand suffrage movement. One of the first women cyclists in the country, with an accommodating and wealthy husband, Mrs Sheppard was an intelligent, well-educated woman with advanced views on the role of women in society. From 1887 she was national Franchise Superintendent of the W.C.T.U. She was an astute organizer and a skilled propagandist. One of her most fruitful conquests was Sir John Hall whom she won to the movement in 1888 and who became the leader of the pro-suffrage politicians. (Incidentally Hall's career in New Zealand is no real indication of social mobility as suggested on p. 40. He was the son of a wealthy English family, educated widely abroad and the characterization 'former English post office worker' hardly indicates his status as private secretary to the permanent head of the department).

As elsewhere, votes for women were opposed for moral and economic as well as political considerations. There were those who believed that the franchise would undermine the natural relationship between the sexes and the moral fibre of the nation. The garb — divided skirts and baggy knickers — adopted by the dress reformers stimulated this fear. The photograph reproduced opposite p. 29 of a dress reform wedding suggests it was not unfounded. The liquor trade also presented strong opposition in the belief that the result of the suffrage would be the enactment of prohibition.

*Women's Suffrage in New Zealand* is a clear and well written account of the franchise movement, its sources, its opponents and the political manoeuvrings behind the suffrage bills that appeared in Parliament. Its most important contribution is that it shows that New Zealand had an indigenous franchise movement, aware of world opinion and utilising current thinking in its own programme. In turn the New Zealand success encouraged franchise groups in other countries. There are a few things it would be interesting to know more about and which would throw more light on the effectiveness of the W.C.T.U. For instance how many of the pro-suffrage M.P.s were brought to their stand by the W.C.T.U. and how many by personal or political considerations or by other pressure groups. In connection with the latter there is little on the role of the unions — male or female — in the movement. Also one would have liked to have known more about the membership of the various franchise groups. The lists of names of prominent members with their (or their husband's!) occupations appended are of little value or interest other than local. A more intensive investigation of the background of the membership might provide interesting comparisons with overseas movements.

RAEWYN DALZIEL

*University of Auckland*