Reviews

John A. Lee. By Erik Olssen. University of Otago Press, 1977. 223 pp. N.Z. price: $14.95.

THE RESTRAINTS of party discipline can often be frustrating to the individual M.P. Ambition, however, will usually temper any desire to flaunt one's individuality: climbing within the party system necessitates some finesse, and to achieve the Treasury benches a fair degree of party loyalty. Frustrations are vented in caucus behind closed doors; there is almost always a facade of unity put up to the public. New Zealand has probably had fewer intra-party rifts (of the public variety, anyway) than most parliamentary democracies. Alongside Australia's list of Billy Hughes, Joe Lyons, Stan Keon, Jack Mullins and Don Chipp we can supply only T.E. Taylor, perhaps the United Party and, of course, John A. Lee. In the history of New Zealand politics, Lee is virtually *sui generis.* Eighteen years after first entering Parliament he was expelled from the New Zealand Labour Party, following two years of public disagreement with the leadership. He formed two splinter parties (the connection between the two, as this book clearly shows, was confined almost to Lee alone), lost his own parliamentary seat at the same time as his party cost Labour several seats in 1943, and then slowly faded away as a political force, assuming the role of commentator, author (the same book would appear under several different titles), and darling of the right. By New Zealand standards, Lee's has been a career without parallel.

Not only is the subject of this book unique: the book itself is almost equally so. Erik Olssen and John A. Lee have been corresponding, meeting, discussing ever since Olssen embarked on his M.A. thesis fifteen years ago. Judgement, one suspects, has occasionally been muted and conjecture about personal factors restricted by the fact that Lee lives on, now in his 87th year. Lee's personal relationships, his marriage, and the role which his wife, Mollie played in his political decisions are mostly untouched in this biography, subjects to be explored, perhaps, when offence can no longer be given to anyone. Why did Lee write to Mollie two and three times a day? Did she ever answer back? And if she did, why has Lee preserved only his own letters? Was Mollie ambitious for Lee, as she is sometimes said to have been, or was she simply the passive recipient of his epistolary self-glorification? How close was Lee to Nordmeyer and McMillan, who seem to have worked with him, and in McMillan's case, used him as a fall guy, egging him on to further excesses during 1939-40? Was Lee really a man without close friends, well insulated by that protective world which self-confidence verging on arrogance can often provide? One day these questions need exploring. Lee, this time, and not Savage, needs to be on the receiving end of a 'Psychopathology in Politics'.

Strictly speaking, Olssen's is a political biography only. And it is a good one at that. With one eye on posterity Lee preserved all his own letters from about 1928 and at least some of the ones he received. The result is that Olssen has been able to draw from a huge reservoir of material. The danger for the historian is simply that it is so one-sided. With nothing available from Savage, Sullivan, Jones, Lee Martin, Fraser, Langstone, Semple, Webb, Armstrong and Parry (to name members of the first Labour Cabinet) Lee's version of events and his view of the issues are likely to prevail. Olssen allows them to triumph. This is a sympathetic biography, in my view uncritically sympathetic at several points. The details provided by Olssen keep raising doubts to this reader which are not always answered in the book. More books on Lee are sure to follow.

What drove Lee to politics in the first place? Olssen makes it clear that it was a combination of factors: his tough background and identification with the underdog that led him to revolt against established thought and customs; a growing idealism born of the experience of war; and a growing realization that his platform style, wit and charm could sway crowds. By the early twenties the Labour Party was in search of some military heroes, and Lee needed a platform. Like many a Labour folk hero he was catapaulted into a nomination and then victory in Auckland East in 1922 by the needs of the moment. With hasty marriages, the partners often take time to settle down. In Lee's case it is hard to resist the feeling that the Labour Party was never much more than a partner of convenience. Inter-party friendships in Parliament are uncommon, yet many of Lee's friends were on the opposite side of the House. His speeches in his first term were usually on the subjects of defence, returned servicemen, and the need for population growth if the yellow peril were to be kept at bay. A coherent philosophy only developed with time, and when it did it was scarcely very radical. Land nationalization and public ownership of industry were not for Lee, and throughout the depression he seems to have felt that nothing more than a hefty dose of Reserve Bank credit was required to solve capitalism's greatest crisis.

Style, however, can often mask lack of ideas; with Lee it always did. His speeches were a mixture of show-off, sexual bravado ('virile' was a favourite adjective) truculence and nationalism, all of it couched in military-cum-biblical language. In Lee's mind, Labour's task was to go 'over the top', the backbenchers ('corporals') leading the charge. During the depression at one point he felt that nothing more than a few trumpet calls were necessary to bring capitalism tumbling down. 'The revolution is here', he told Mollie excitedly in 1932 – after his own rhetoric had been well received in Parliament.

Lee was neither a good colleague nor a hard worker in the usual political sense. Olssen shows that his boundless energy could often be suddenly channelled off into writing. He was reluctant to take committee positions or the inevitably tedious (but vital) organizational roles at conference. The voice beautiful, the youthful (virile?) presence, the empty sleeve with all that it symbolized, the talent for metaphor and witticisms – these were what he felt would take Lee 'over the top'. The result was that apart from state housing which he organized with zest between 1936 and 1938, it is hard to think of any substantial contribution that he made. Olssen at one point calls him a 'political travelling salesman'. Indeed he was, with all the appeal to the ailing

worker of the 1930s of that peddler of potions and patent remedies, the Rawleigh man.

The striking thing about Lee is his lack of political sensitivity. For a man who laid great stress on comradeship Lee showed little talent for cooperation and almost no awareness of the need sometimes to bide one's time. His conduct after his failure to get into Cabinet in 1935 seems particularly immature. He talked ominously of the need for 'a final showdown', yet enjoyed being consoled, even courted, by his colleagues whom he allowed to persuade him to take the under-secretaryship offered by Savage. It should have been clear to him that, given his age, time was on his side. But impatience and impetuousity got the better of him. Despite the fact that in June 1936 he was given his own department (Housing), the travel privileges of a Minister, a house in Wellington and the right to attend Cabinet – nearly all the perquisites of a Cabinet position without the actual title – he continued to sulk. In fact most Cabinets have fewer talented people in them than are seated further back in the House. Lee was neither the first nor the last to miss out. One gets the feeling, however, that he seized an excuse to be less than a total 'party man'. During the next two years he grew more reckless in his denunciations of Savage, both in caucus and in rudely-worded letters to the Prime Minister. Every step Lee took seemed designed to thrust him forward publicly. And every step also made more unlikely the possibility of his ever making Cabinet.

The question that has to be asked – and Olssen fails to ask it – is, did Lee ever realize that his efforts were self-defeating? If he didn't, then he was astonishingly insensitive to mood. If he did appreciate his difficulties then what game was he playing? Was he hoping to 'go over the top' on the basis of his reputation outside of caucus alone – to take a Cabinet post by storm? If this were his calculation then he seems, despite fifteen years within caucus, to have displayed very little understanding of the normal avenues for advancement.

There is another possibility: that Lee really didn't care. Was it just action (success would be best, but dramatic failure could be a good substitute) that he wanted? 'I see myself being turned into a spearpoint, at which point one becomes first casualty or the first officer', he told Morgan Williams at one stage. There seems to be evidence that tactically he was a gambler. By the middle of 1938, Lee was adopting a strangely independent role for one wanting promotion by normal means. During the campaign he helped colleagues he liked, and criticized – semi-publicly – those he didn't. His book *Socialism in New Zealand* and his crusade around the country during the campaign, which kept him out of the House for most of the 1938 session (did the Whips always give him leave?) are evidence of an increasingly independent role. Taking risks and being at the eye of the storm, seem to have been more exciting than sheltering anonymously under the protective party umbrella.

In retrospect it looks clear that the marriage of Lee and Labour was floundering by the middle of 1938, if not before. One or two of his more ambitious younger colleagues, such as McMillan, were happy to help the partnership self-destruct, but Lee was the main agent of his own downfall.

Olssen's chapters on the period 1938-40 are the least satisfactory part of the book, perhaps because Olssen identifies with the issues Lee was discussing at the time – insulation of the economy, caucus democracy, and a tough line

with British financiers – and feels that no special explanation of Lee's tactics is necessary. The author finds it comforting to believe that Lee was leading an army that had right on its side and (possibly?) might as well. It was only trickery or chicanery that did him in. Leaving aside the question of what Lee really stood for – and Olssen shows little appreciation of Sinclair's doubts expressed some years ago in 'The Lee - Sutch Syndrome' (NZJH, VIII, 2), there is the fact that Lee's fellow-caucus dissidents were becoming disturbingly aware of their spokesman's truculence by the end of 1938. Of the Lee letter circulated at the end of 1938 Nordmeyer commented that it might 'be more effective if you eliminate some of the ego writing'; O'Brien felt that Lee was simply arming his enemies. By the time war broke out and Lee made another effort to break into Cabinet, Nordmeyer found, on consulting the backbenchers, that if anyone was to be added to Cabinet, McMillan and not Lee would get the nod. In September 1939 when a move was made to undermine Fraser's position in caucus as deputy-leader, Fraser was re-elected deputy by 39 votes to 3 with some abstaining. In the eyes of caucus members, if not Lee's biographer, Lee had already all but exhausted his caucus support months before he was expelled from the party.

Explaining Lee's behaviour from 1938 onwards causes problems for Olssen. At first – given Olssen's sympathy with the issues – the reader might conclude that abuse of Savage and the Lee letter were all natural responses. But when it comes to a public attack on Nash in Parliament in August 1939 Olssen feels called upon to provide an explanation. Lee was suffering from 'tension and grief' resulting from his mother's death. Can we really accept this? Is it not true that this public attack on a Minister was simply the latest in a long line of outbursts dating back for more than twelve months, outbursts which no normally ambitious politician would ever be guilty of in public? Surely the under-secretary had long since thrown caution to the winds? It is not single acts of extremism that require explanation: it is the whole style of Lee's political conduct stretching back over quite a long time.

Olssen's final chapters are well-written and convincing. The account of Lee's behaviour after his expulsion from the Labour Party in 1940 again tells us much about his political instincts – or lack of them. What Lee believed would be a lethal army of sharp-shooters within the Democratic Labour Party turned out to be a 'ragtime band', short of funds but long on rhetoric. Lee hoped to fire them, and the country at large, with the need for John A. Lee. Yet, like the victim of an arid second marriage, he often hankered after a return to the first wife. As he alternately slammed the Labour Government and sought readmission by the back door he succeeded only in confusing his new supporters just as he had angered his former colleagues. The Democratic Labour Party and the Democratic Soldier Labour Party vanished, John A. Lee presiding over their dissolution with the same vigour he had applied to terminating his earlier more promising career. Lee's career proves one maxim: nothing dissipates political prospects faster than a reputation for being erratic.

There are points one could quibble with in this biography. Infelicities in style and punctuation abound; useful pieces of information, such as the actual voting figures in 1922, are omitted; Labour didn't keep its proportion of the city vote in 1928 (p.46); Lee's march up Auckland's main street in 1932 was on 14 April, not 15 April (p.57). But despite these and other errors,

Olssen's is a major work, worthy of a wide audience. Occasionally one has the feeling that had its publication been delayed a few years the book might have been able to answer some of the nagging doubts that remain about Lee's career.

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The Great New Zealand Myth: a Study of the Discovery and Origin Traditions of the Maori. By D.R. Simmons. A.H. and A.W. Reed, Wellington, 1976. xi, 504 pp. N.Z. price: $18.50.

ANYONE who decides to study Maori tradition faces several difficulties. There is the language; and there is the extraordinary bulk and variety of the material available for study, and its chaotic condition. But perhaps the worst problem, because its implications may not be fully realized, arises from the scholar's isolation. Since there are so very few people working in this area, where are one's ideas to come from?

Modern Maori elders cannot provide a theoretical framework. Either one is influenced, consciously or otherwise, by earlier writers in New Zealand, or one looks outside New Zealand: to work done by anthropologists and historians of religion in fields such as mythology and symbolism, and in particular to J. Prytz Johansen's monographs on Maori religion (1954, 1958).[1] One cannot have it both ways, for New Zealand scholarship in the field of Maori tradition is so isolated and ingrown that a gulf yawns between the two. It is no accident that Johansen's work is so little known in this country.

D.R. Simmons's *The Great New Zealand Myth* is a massive book of 504 pages, with seventeen chapters, eight appendices, and an 82-page bibliography. The 'myth' with which he is concerned is not, as one might think, a religious narrative but 'a commonly-held belief which is untrue'. It is, he tells us, generally believed that according to Maori tradition a man named Kupe in about 925 A.D. left a place named Hawaiki and discovered this country, that the first settlement was made by Toi and Whatonga in about 1150, and that in about 1350 a 'great fleet' of six canoes brought most of the early ancestors of the Maori to New Zealand. His book is essentially a criticism of this belief, which he traces to its origins, largely in the writings of S. Percy Smith, and shows to have no foundation in authentic tradition.

This is a most valuable thing to have done. It is not, though, the first time that Simmons has demonstrated this. In 1969, in an important article (NZJH, III, 1) which was based upon an M.A. thesis presented in 1963, he examined the evidence for the popular 'myth' concerning Kupe, Toi and a 'fleet' and, in the space of eighteen tightly argued pages, demolished it. His present book covers very similar ground, this time in tremendous detail. It is based upon a

[1] J. Prytz Johansen. *The Maori and his Religion in its Non-Ritualistic Aspects* and *Studies in Maori Rites and Myths.* Munksgaard, Copenhagen.