

## Reviews

*Te Puea: A Biography*. By Michael King. Hodder and Stoughton, Auckland, 1977. 322pp. N.Z. price: \$12.95.

THE little writing on twentieth-century Maori history that exists is dominated by a concentration on a handful of western-educated leaders. Michael King in *Te Puea: A Biography* promises 'to break new ground' (p.15) by analyzing the role of a different sort of Maori leader in her context. The promise is not kept.

Before dealing with Dr King's failures, the strengths of his study require mention. He deserves congratulation for the energy which he has brought to the collection of anecdotes about Te Puea, especially those collected from the decreasing number of older people who knew her. The tapes of his discussions should place future historians in his debt. Furthermore, King has managed to tell a good story, combining his own narrative skills with use of some colourful oral material: here I have in mind particularly the various stories supplied by Tumokai Katipa and Piri Poutapu. It will, no doubt, be an interesting experience for many Pakeha reading this life to discover just how energetic Maori, and especially Waikato, were in economic and political endeavours in their supposedly quiescent period during the first half of the twentieth century. *Te Puea* provides a useful narrative of such activity.

But problems arise almost from the beginning of this book and they are signalled in the preface. Here, the author describes at length his aims and his attempts to overcome the problems inherent in a purely documentary study through the extensive use of oral testimony. King's points are well taken; Maori history must involve various types of oral research if the full extent of the sources available to the historian is to be utilized. More problematical is the weakness in oral research pointed out in the preface; the problem that oral testimony 'can unintentionally take on the character of a series of loosely-strung homilies', and that it can consist of 'anecdotes that preserve maxims and morals' (p.12). In its weakest sections, and this includes most of the second half of the book, *Te Puea* exemplifies this problem. Certainly the text is not just a string of stories, but there seems to be little interpretative structure guiding the discussion. This contrasts with the strong and coherent narrative line of the first nine chapters.

The tendency to lapse into anecdotal narrative weakens the structure of much of the text and indicates a failure to distinguish between what is and what is not important. Too often, instead of explaining, the book merely describes.

The lack of explanatory power can be seen, for example, in the discussion of Te Puea's concert party, Te Pou O Mangatawhiri (TPM). In three pages King describes the comings and goings of the group, what they wore, how much they earned, the fact that the TPM 'was the first group to popularize stringed instrument backing for Maori songs' (p.117-119), but little is said of why Te Puea revived traditional songs and haka. There should be some discussion of Te Puea's determination to revive the traditional arts of Waikato as a means of cementing group unity in the face of the disintegrative effects of capitalism, and of how she used this reintroduction of selected traditional practices as a cloak of orthodoxy to persuade the older people to accept her more innovative social and political policies. King notes this latter point, quoting from my own work, but only twenty pages on when discussing another subject. There is explanation in the book, but it is often hard to find.

A much more severe weakness relates to the role of the biographer as historian. The historical context of the book's subject is not analyzed. This is due to the concentration on telling the story of Te Puea and to an apparent unwillingness to examine thoroughly the social forces influencing her. *Te Puea* is the tale of a strong individual battling adversity and winning out through her personal strengths. It is apparently a story of total success. 'In forty years of relentless work she had [by the time of her death in 1952] restored to them [Waikato] their system of rural-based extended families, their communal patterns of living, their traditional leadership and their cultural activities' (p.273). Like a good, individualistic New Zealander Te Puea can claim to be boss of her own life, and of that of Waikato as well. But what of the problems consequent on the transition from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist mode of production, of the continuing effects of proletarianization as the Pakeha farming frontier separated Maori from control over the means of production? Te Puea's efforts were part of a continuum in the struggle against oppression whether it be in the more easily perceived form of Pakeha imperialism or in the amorphous but no less destructive pressures of capitalism. Empirical concentration on Te Puea alone involves a failure to get beyond the surface features of Maori life. A failure of explanation is not absolved by the book's repetition of the litany of doing things according to 'Maori ways' with 'Maori values' and in 'Maori activities', whatever these things might be.

By failing to thoroughly examine the social forces affecting Te Puea, King allows his work to drift into the 'our Maoris' historical tradition. A Pakeha could read this book, empathise with Te Puea, think that she had a tough time of life, particularly with some individually nasty Pakeha, but still conclude that the biography dealt with something now past and totally separated from the concerns of what the reader may perceive as present-day Maori 'agitators'.

Mention should be made of some other problems in the book. No reference numbers are cited for the materials consulted in the Ramsden papers and the Maori Affairs files. Future researchers will have a difficult time trying to follow up King's footnotes. Second, he seems generally unaware that it is normal scholarly practice to acknowledge secondary sources from which primary references are taken, instead of implying, by footnoting only the primary source, that he found all the material himself.

Finally, some oddities of expression occur in the text. There is a strange concern with stature. '[S]he [Tiahuia, Te Puea's mother] was intelligent, strong-willed, and full of energy — features that made her seem larger than her below-average height' (p.35) or 'although not tall, he [Te Tahī Iwikau, a lover of Te Puea] had an exceptionally upright bearing' (p.47). And just what does King

mean when he writes of Te Puea that she had 'large, clear and slightly hooded eyes that suggested depths of knowledge on her side and an ability to enter people's minds on the other'? (p.40).

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*Samuel Marsden: The Great Survivor.* By A.T. Yarwood. A.H. & A.W. Reed Ltd., Wellington, 1977. xv, 341 pp., maps, illustrated. N.Z. price: \$14.95.

NO HAGIOGRAPHY, this: judicious yet unflinching in its assessment. Sandy Yarwood's biography of the Reverend Samuel Marsden will stand without serious challenge for a long time. Marsden was self-righteous, inflexible in the pursuit of his own justification, capable of lies and distortion to protect his own reputation, yet capable, also, of insights into human nature which catch the breath for their understanding and perspicacity. His desire to exercise unquestioned power would ensure that he would quarrel with everyone with whom he worked — in colonial or missionary politics — but his impassioned commitment to the causes he espoused is not really under question. The mission to New Zealand became the great love of his life, particularly as he wrestled in bitter dispute with a succession of New South Wales governors. His involvement in Polynesia stands in sharp contrast to his growing indifference to the tragedy of the Australian Aboriginals; here, his self-interest as land owner and sheep owner triumphed over any ability he may once have possessed for simple compassion.

Not that he was altogether loved by the missionary settlers in New Zealand. Thomas Kendall, one of the first, soon came to an accurate assessment of the disordered chaos of Marsden's life, which would affect the history of the mission: 'Mr Marsden will have his way in every thing . . . he pays little regard to the Opinion of Others & is the most slovenly man for a pious man I almost ever heard of . . . he pays no attention to arrangement or system nor does he gain the good will of those with whom he has to deal.'<sup>1</sup> A decade later, the Reverend Henry Williams complained in identical terms: Marsden's 'heart is deeply engaged in the mission but his ideas are rather wild. I am surprised that a man that had so much intercourse with the world, and New Zealand, should be so very short sighted. But it is the man. His own private affairs are conducted on the same plan, or without any plan whatever'.<sup>2</sup>

His failure to provide adequate supplies to the mission in the early years created some of the difficulties the settlers faced in their ambiguous relationship with their protectors, the Ngapuhi of the Bay of Islands. Forced into a position of economic dependency, the missionaries had to accept Ngapuhi terms of patronage. When accused of an obstinate refusal to recognize the realities of this situation, Marsden obsessively sought for scapegoats among the missionaries themselves.

<sup>1</sup> Kendall to Rev. Josiah Pratt, 13 February 1815, ms. A1443, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

<sup>2</sup> 1 April 1826, Journal, Letters and Papers of Henry and Marianne Williams . . . , typescripts, Auckland Institute and Museum.