

## Correspondence

I HOPE it is not too late to offer some observations on Keith Sinclair's 'New Zealand Literature' (*New Zealand Journal of History*, April, 1978). No doubt one should not expect too much ballast in a *ballon d'essai* and it always agreeable to read a piece about literature which is itself well written — agreeable and also, alas, increasingly unusual. Nonetheless, the piece, though disarming and avowedly 'personal', contains assertions and speculations which are misleading and even mischievous.

One's uneasiness begins with his treatment of the writers of the 1930s. They did not, it seems, 'spring from the masses or from the soil'. The population of New Zealand was at that time barely a million and a half. Does it make sense to speak of 'the masses' then? It hardly makes sense even for present-day New Zealand, when the population has doubled. And what about that 'soil'? In a country so overwhelmingly pastoral and agricultural, and one where the social extremes were always within arm's or farm's length of each other, phrases like 'masses' and 'from the soil' are empty clichés from the adolescence of Marxism.

Again, the literature of the time was 'markedly élitist' and writers and critics were 'highly educated'. But what else would one expect in a country where access to higher education was easily available to anyone with even modest intellectual skills, and especially verbal skills? Is the situation any different now? I pass over the word élitist a stale California vogue word, cant which signals surrender and the treasonous clerk crying 'Kamerad' to the enemy and what he stands for.

Keith Sinclair finds it surprising that so many of this generation were 'obsessed with Oxford', with getting a Rhodes Scholarship, 'the height of colonial male, middle-class ambition'. Here he seems to have become confused between literature and scholarship. For 'higher education' in New Zealand was not in those days so very 'high'. There was no university there to match what Oxford and Cambridge had to offer. What more natural than that any young man with scholarly or academic ambitions should be eager to go to a place where he could perfect his skills? It was not for 'literary' reasons that a Rhodes scholarship was sought. And, apart from the less well-endowed Commonwealth Research Fellowship to Cambridge, there was practically nothing else, except for those — very few — who could pay their own way.

It is also nonsense to suggest that the Rhodes scholarship marked a terminal in people's careers. Those of us who did get one used to describe ourselves as men with a great future behind them: but the irony of that self-deprecation disguised the acceptance of a challenge. The records sufficiently show that the acceptance was not altogether idle. But, in any case, as far as literature, Sinclair's ostensible theme, is concerned, his whole excursus is not merely erroneous but irrelevant.

Again, Sinclair stresses the fact that 'Many of the leaders of the student generation of the thirties, and New Zealand writers in general, became expatriates'. But

he does not seem to ask why this was so. In fact, the staffs of the New Zealand universities were so small that there were no jobs for the expatriate scholars to return to; and the people he names in this context were all scholars, with the exception of myself. And where, in New Zealand in 1945, could I have found a job at all equivalent in interest or emolument to my job at the Clarendon Press?

Nor, in spite of the huge expansion of the New Zealand Universities since the war, is the position so different now as Sinclair appears to imply. The universities of England are full of 'expatriate' New Zealand scholars and teachers. And, in spite of the greatly increased facilities for publication in New Zealand and the fact that so many writers have been able to follow Frank Sargeson's excellent example and stay at home, an English publisher's imprint is still sought after and there are many expatriate New Zealand writers — probably more than there were in the 1930s. Sinclair has overlooked Basil Dowling, Hubert Witheford, Kevin Ireland, and no doubt a good many others.

Sinclair also seems to deplore the strong influence of the study of the classics and hint that we should all have learnt Maori. For my part I regret that I did not learn Maori but not at all that I studied the classics: it would be derisory to compare the importance of the two for the world of scholarship and letters at large. By this I intend no slight whatever to Maori studies. I applaud their belated development in recent times; and I can see that a knowledge of Maori is important to a New Zealand historian: one hopes that Sinclair himself, as a historian of the Maori wars, has mastered the language and encouraged his pupils to do so.

As for Sinclair's observations about a Catholic mafia and a homosexual mafia, one hardly feels called upon to comment. I take the word 'mafia' to imply an element of organisation and conspiracy and collusion. Since most New Zealand writers seem to be in a continual state of displeasure with one another and tend to be separated from one another by great distances which encourage misunderstanding and malicious gossip, I suspect that the conditions requisite for mafia operations do not exist. And, as the only conceivable 'godfather' would be that saintly innocent, Frank Sargeson, I think Sinclair, without looking under it first, can sleep quietly in his agnostic and heterosexual bed.

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MICHAEL KING states in *Te Puea* (p.173) that the attack on Rangiaowhia during the Waikato war took place on 20 February 1864, that Maoris allege this was a Sunday but that in fact the day was a Saturday. In his recent article, 'New Zealand Oral History' (NZJH, XII, 118-9), he again says that Maori tradition has it that Rangiaowhia was attacked on a Sunday, but he then claims that reference to a perpetual calendar 'makes it clear that the day in question was a Saturday.'

In fact it is Dr King who is in error. The troops set out from Te Rore on Saturday 20 February 1864, marched through the night, and attacked Rangiaowhia on the morning of Sunday 21 February. (Cameron's despatch of 25 February to Grey in the 1864 *New Zealand Gazette*, pp.89-91.)

In the context of a magnificent biography of Te Puea this slip over the day and date of an event before she was born can be dismissed as a minor blemish. But in

a discussion of the ways in which oral and documentary records sometimes differ because the oral record is 'demonstrably incorrect', failure to ascertain the actual date of an event under discussion is much more serious.

Oral tradition, true or false, can cast a much longer shadow than verifiable 'fact'. As a corollary to Dr King's article, may I suggest that historians (sociologists, anthropologists etc.) working in the oral history field must check discrepancies between oral and documentary evidence much more rigorously than Dr King did in this instance, and that they should also try to trace how 'demonstrably incorrect' traditions arose and what effects they have had on later events and attitudes. Whether the 'facts' of what actually happened at Rangiaowhia on 21 February 1864 can now be ascertained with any certainty is doubtful. But it is beyond doubt that Maori-Pakeha relations in the Waikato (and beyond) have been profoundly influenced for over a century by what Maoris believe took place there. These oral traditions and what gave rise to them merit study in depth.

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### *Auckland*

I APPRECIATE that authors of books reviewed in the *Journal* do not usually reply to their reviewers. However I feel obliged to reply to M.P.K. Sorrenson's review of my *Race Relations* (NZJH, XII, 168-9). He makes three erroneous statements.

First, he implies I have ignored the work of Henry Reynolds which deals with Aboriginal resistance to early colonization. On p.87 of my book he will find a footnote which comments on Reynolds' article (which incidently appeared after my manuscript was written). Also on p.37 of my book there is the observation that the more numerous Aborigines in the north 'were sometimes able to sustain effective guerilla campaigns for somewhat longer [than in the south]'.  
 Second, Professor Sorrenson says I have 'virtually ignored the Aboriginal participation in the economy. It was nearly always significant in the pastoral industry and, in the North, quite essential.' Referring to Queensland in the later nineteenth century I wrote (p.38) 'As the frontiers became more remote from resources both pastoralists and pearl shellers were more inclined to employ Aboriginal labour...the use of Aboriginal labourers in the more isolated areas gradually became more common. The pastoral industry in particular was increasingly dependent upon Aboriginal stockmen and station hands by the early twentieth century.' On the same page I also commented on the use of Aborigines in the pearl shell industry and on pastoral stations in Western Australia. On p.54 I wrote about the Northern Territory pastoral industry and quoted Bleakley's report which discussed how the industry was, by the 1920s, 'absolutely dependent on the blacks for the labour.' On pp.65-66 Professor Sorrenson will find my statement that today Aborigines 'in pastoral enterprises...make up some 80 per cent of the required work force.'

Third, Professor Sorrenson says that I have 'unfortunately ignored' modern Maori and Aboriginal protest about their situation. Pp.70-72 deal specifically with such Aboriginal protests, and pp.81-83 contain the same information for the contemporary Maori.

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