

P.J. Gibbons, *Astride the River: A History of Hamilton*, Hamilton City Council, 1977. 381pp., illustrations, maps. N.Z. price: \$14.50.

IN commissioning Mr P.J. Gibbons to write its centennial history the Hamilton City Council made a wise choice. Gibbons is a trained local historian who appreciates the need to relate, in his area of study, similarities and dissimilarities to larger developments. This is especially necessary in the case of Hamilton, a city which has not only exemplified (often dramatically) broader New Zealand trends, but also shown a distinctive and individual character.

Astride the River has a simple structure. Hamilton is regarded as passing through three phases: 1864-1901, 1902-39, 1940-76. The first phase tells of the establishment of the two military villages 'astride the river' to guard confiscated Maori land. The settlers survived but made little progress. Although Hamilton became a borough in 1877, there was little growth thereafter. Hamilton's population was virtually unchanged between 1878 and 1901.

The second part deals with the pre-war period of unrelieved boom which set in about 1902 when the middle Waikato valley became a prosperous region of intensive dairy farming. Hamilton grew as a market centre along with the region. As shops, offices and houses were built the usual problems of town expansion appeared. There was a need to provide drains and sewers, saleyards, roads, and a water supply. As elsewhere, this provoked disagreements on the borough council and among the borough's chief executives; but in Hamilton the disputes could be of extraordinary bitterness.

The third phase takes the story from the Second World War to 1977, the centennial year of the now Hamilton City Council. This was a time of mushroom development. In the 1950s and 1960s no provincial New Zealand city had a comparable population growth. There is apparently vigorous industrial development. It is mainly processing, however, with the input of skilled labour relatively low. Real urban growth lies, as before the war, within the servicing sector. In the last three decades Hamilton has revealed a distinctive demographic pattern. The population is youthful, and few of the adults have lived all their lives in Hamilton. A large proportion has come from elsewhere in search of employment opportunities. Gibbons reminds us how, to an unexpected degree, the urban drift of the Maori people has given Hamilton a significant component of Polynesian people in its population.

The shortcomings of this book are few and minor. Almost entirely, I suspect, they reflect the speed with which research and writing for publication had to be carried out. Some facts were open to question: I specifically recall references to Marsden, J.C. Firth and the R.N.Z.A.F.'s World War II role in Hamilton. I suspect, too, that it was a mistake to convert pre-decimal currency into dollars and cents. Nineteenth-century sums of money so expressed give unreal impressions of comparability to modern levels of purchasing power. The fine appendices and maps were less limited in usefulness than they could have been because Gibbons precisely referred to them so sparingly in his text. But, in all, these flaws are superficial and detract little from the book.

Gibbons wrote his account to meet (and rightly so) the expectations of the Hamilton City Council, and to make it instructive, yet readable for a general audience. He intended, he said, the book to be 'serious' though not academic. One feels that he succeeded admirably in communicating with his wider audience,

and also satisfied the demands of the world of scholarship.

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