

Reviews

Johnsonville: Continuity and Change in a New Zealand Township. By David G. Pearson. George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1980. 204pp. N.Z. price: \$8.95.

THIS work by a sociologist will be of considerable interest to historians. David Pearson seeks to trace the historical and contemporary social structure of a specific locality. More fundamentally his aim is methodological: to demonstrate (to his fellow sociologists) that ‘“community studies” need not be ahistorical, atheoretical, totally beset by problems of cultural uniqueness’. The local setting is to be used to illustrate the influence of wider social processes; it is to provide an ‘exploratory base’ to examine the concepts of class, community and egalitarianism. Above all, perhaps, he seeks to provide a replicable model of social change in a community.

The first two chapters set the scene, historical and contemporary. Basically the changing occupational structure is delineated using street directories and a modified version of the Elley and Irving socio-economic scale. Both sources and method of classification have their limitations: directories capture the unskilled transients only imperfectly; the occupational scale conceals important differences of status. Even so, the broad transformation of Johnsonville from a rural settlement to a ‘working class’ village, and thence to a more socially mixed dormitory suburb, is clearly shown.

Next the patterns of property (real estate) ownership are examined to demonstrate a consistent (and not unexpected) pattern of inequality as well as the development of residential segregation. The first three decades of this century saw a narrowing of the range of visible inequality, while the patterns of property ownership by the 1970s apparently marked ‘a return to an earlier era’. Yet Pearson’s conclusions remain qualified by his sources. Rating books, on which he relies, give a measure of potential rather than actual wealth: they say little about the quality of the property, and nothing about the degree of indebtedness of its owner. The size of the property held may be more a measure of credit-worthiness (for the time being) than of capital. Small proprietors clearly occupied properties of greater value than did professional men, but they were not necessarily more wealthy.

What then was the relationship between occupation, property ownership and involvement in community activities? Again, not surprisingly, Pearson finds a broad coincidence between wealth and power. Until the 1930s local notables dominated local politics, church affairs, and to a lesser extent the organization of recreation. From the 1930s, office holding remained ‘elitist’ but economic standing no longer necessarily meant social prominence; leadership in different spheres of community activity no longer overlapped to the extent it once did. The broad patterns are clear enough, but the mechanisms of power—why it was sought by

some and its exercise accepted apparently apathetically by many—remain shadowy.

How fluid then was the social structure? Pearson employs street directories, marriage records, and an extensive local survey to study geographic and occupational mobility. He finds high levels of transiency in the late nineteenth century, and growing stability in the last fifty years. Even so, roughly half of the residents who appeared at the beginning of the decade had disappeared from the records ten years later. This picture of continuing fluidity also emerges from a study of occupational inheritance: with high levels of short range movement across occupational boundaries over a generation. Yet more strikingly revealed is the degree of inheritance: despite greater mobility from the 1940s, two-thirds of the bridegrooms surveyed still remained 'within their father's white-collar or blue collar world'.

How then was inequality perceived? Pearson draws essentially on the recollections of locals to show that many residents were conscious of distinctions within Johnsonville and of differences between their suburb and others. He argues that the basis of the local system of social status changed from personal to impersonal attributes, from behaviour to possessions. (This is a crude summary of a more subtle argument, but I doubt that the change is as marked as he sees it.) Furthermore he argues that most people recognize the existence of classes—not in terms of a direct clash of interests, but rather in terms of a pecking order of prestige. Perhaps the most important point from the evidence he cites however is that, while social distinctions were widely recognized, there was not a well developed language of class: 'imagery may be relatively inchoate'. And while inequality may be perceived, personal circumstances are rarely seen as fixed or permanent. Why should this be—given the continuing degree of inequality and occupational inheritance portrayed by Pearson?

The answer is imbedded in the last two rather methodological chapters in which Pearson examines the concepts of community and egalitarianism. Essentially he argues that '“community” can be an ideological force that masks a variety of inequalities and power differentials'. He sees the relatively small scale of the community and the work place as helping to maintain an egalitarian tradition which did 'not necessarily clash with visible inequalities'. He exploits the ambiguous nature of the concept of equality, seeing the belief in 'intrinsic equality' as prevailing in Johnsonville up to the 1930s, while the ideology of equal opportunity became more pervasive from the 1950s.

Here Pearson's argument is plausible, but not entirely convincing; his theorizing outruns his evidence. More generally he has not been entirely successful in the difficult task of marrying structure and process, synchrony and diachrony. His historical perspective consists largely of a series of snapshots of the social structure. The changes observed are largely accounted for by general reference to wider social processes, rather than by a close examination of how these processes occurred at the local level. Questions that need to be pursued further, for example, are: what was the process of land acquisition and disposal; how and why did Johnsonville become a working class village, and later change its character; when and how exactly did changes in transport have an impact on the journey to work and the changing social structure; what were the origins and effects of government housing policy locally?

These criticisms do not diminish the importance of this pioneering work which should stimulate further research. In the meantime, many will find this the most

satisfying account of New Zealand social stratification, albeit at the community level.

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Economics for Historians. By G.R. Hawke. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980. 237pp. N.Z. price: \$15.25 soft cover, \$41.95 hard cover.

THE BEST thing that a reviewer of this book can do, at least in these pages, is to try to explain just what kind of reader is likely to find it useful. The author, Gary Hawke, is Professor of Economic History at the Victoria University of Wellington and is in an excellent position to mediate between the disciplines of economics and history. However, this book is not for just any student of history interested in finding out about economics. Rather it is aimed at those who have already had some basic grounding in economic principles and who wish to understand more clearly the relevance of those principles to the study of history, especially economic history.

One chapter, the first, will be of more general interest. Here Professor Hawke discusses some differences between the disciplines of history and economics. His stance is not that one is superior to the other; historians and economists typically ask different questions and employ different methods, but both can benefit from understanding what the other is about. Any historian, however ill-informed on economic theory, should find this discussion useful. Hawke's general approach is to emphasize that economic theory, in the words of Keynes, 'does not furnish a body of settled conclusions immediately applicable to policy. It is a method rather than a doctrine, an apparatus of the mind, a technique of thinking, which helps its possessor to draw correct conclusions' (pp.7-8). Some of the general features of this 'technique of thinking' are described in this chapter in terms that anyone can understand.

After that the going gets much tougher. Though Hawke describes his book as an introduction to elementary concepts of economics he proceeds along at a brisk pace explaining in very succinct terms the meaning of concepts such as economic rent, quasirent, fundist and materialist approaches to capital, etc. I doubt if many readers who have never studied economics will get very far past the first chapter. It is not that Professor Hawke's prose and explanations lack clarity. It is simply that so much ground is covered in so short a space. My own training in formal economics ended at second-year undergraduate level in 1958 and I found that I had to read very slowly and carefully, often going back and re-reading passages to be sure I had understood them.

The book then is not for beginners but it should be very helpful for its intended readers. Ideally these would be, I imagine, students studying economic history at an advanced level, who have earlier completed some elementary courses in economic theory. The book is particularly geared towards students of British economic history, most of the examples being drawn from there, but this is not of