

Reviews

The Oxford History of New Zealand. Edited by W.H. Oliver with B.R. Williams. Clarendon Press, Oxford; Oxford University Press, Wellington, 1981. 572pp., N.Z. Prices: \$39.95 hard cover, \$24.95 soft cover.

IN 1933 the first collective scholarly survey of New Zealand history was published by the Cambridge University Press. Camhist was the History of the British Empire; one chapter was entitled, 'New Zealand and the Empire'. There was no New Zealand (that is, colonial) editor, but James Hight was the New Zealand 'adviser'. Nearly fifty years later we have Oxhist. Perhaps its most striking feature is that it virtually omits the British Empire, but fails to replace it by any account of New Zealand foreign policy. Consequently the book, as a whole, is curiously inward-looking, but not, so far as I can tell, from any intention.

Oxhist was written by sixteen people, four of them women, none of them Maoris, from all the universities, but half of them from Canterbury and Auckland. Only one of the authors grew up in the United Kingdom: colonial days are behind us then. Five of the twelve Camhist authors were immigrants and one, A.J. Harrop, spent most of his life in London.

In 1950 I wrote, 'A generation of pedants needs to toil at the definition of minutiae before we can have better histories than those we now possess'. I should not call most of my colleagues 'pedants', but it is very satisfying to look at the bibliographies in Oxhist and to appreciate the extraordinary amount of research that has been completed and reported over the past thirty years. Consequently, the general level of Oxhist is far higher than anything that would have been possible until, at least, the 1970s. History is alive and well and living in New Zealand.

Like all 'subjects' history has its fashions: computer history, women's history, oral history. . . . The main new thrust of Oxhist is towards modern, statistical, demographical, social history, but this is precisely where the research remains yet to be done and the literature is most thin. Although they are very interesting, to my mind the chapters on social history are the least impressive in the book. Two of their authors, P.J. Gibbons and Graeme Dunstall, though both are able historians, appear not to have published anything relevant to the chapters they contribute. One admires the amount of original work the authors of the social chapters have had to do, but they have not papered over the cracks in research to date. This is shown in the errors they make. Erik Olssen thinks that 'six o'clock closing' began in 1918. Gibbons gets into much strife. He has W.P. Reeves at Oxford, which he did not reach, and he has Jehovah's Witnesses being 'relentlessly pursued' during World War I. They were will-o'-the-wisps—there were none in New Zealand nor anywhere else, nor were any 'Russelites', one of their previous names, listed in the census of 1916. And he writes some nonsense. For instance, he believes that working class values were either absent among our early

immigrants or 'attenuated'. Most of the nineteenth-century immigrants came from that class. This error does not arise from social research but dogma about what the working class ought to think. On p.314 he tells us that in Europe the 1920s was the era of surrealist art and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, whereas in New Zealand it was 'the age of the cow cockies'. Such a comparison is intellectually fraudulent: in many parts of Europe the unemployed might more meaningfully have been mentioned instead of artists.

Len Richardson says that in 1890 the 'ideological gap between the Government and the Opposition was slight'. This is a strange observation, for they were divided by the greatest political issue of the day, land taxation. A page later he virtually contradicts himself over this.

In general, the chapters present well-written surveys of their subjects, and almost all are, in one way or another, of a high standard. One article fits uneasily into the survey scheme. Ann Parsonson wrote a challenging doctoral thesis on Maori land sales which she summarizes here. Her points deserve a page in M.P.K. Sorrenson's over-lapping chapter on 'Maori and Pakeha'. Her views are perverse as well as original. For instance, she maintains that nineteenth-century Maoris sold land to the government so that they could prove their title to it (p.149)! While such actions occurred, as when Teira tried to sell land at Waitara, few people could believe that this motive was a general cause of land sales.

The final section of the book, 'Precarious Maturity', includes excellent chapters by Robert Chapman, G.R. Hawke, Graeme Dunstall and W.H. Oliver. W.H. Oliver's article might be called 'Down Memory Lane', or 'The Recollections of a Former Editor of *Landfall* and *Comment*' but, as always, he makes some very judicious and perceptive remarks. I particularly appreciated (p.454) his comments on the poems of Kendrick Smithyman. It is as difficult to capture his qualities as it is easy to describe those of James K. Baxter.

The final chapter on politics, by Robert Chapman, and to a lesser extent that by Gary Hawke, are surprising. Dunstall and Oliver, on society and high culture, reach almost to the present. Hawke in a bland, sweeping article, just gets into the 1970s. Chapman, as always, offers a thoughtful and stimulating chapter, but it takes him eleven pages to get through Labour's 1935 'manifesto' to social security in 1938; fifteen to 1940; twenty-three to 1949, which leaves ten for the last thirty-two years. His justification for this procedure is that Labour in 1935 set the terms of political debate for forty years. True for—social security or import licences or full employment, but false for—Springbok tours or inflation. The result, however, is that there is more about the National governments of the past generation in the Pelhist than in the Oxhist.

KEITH SINCLAIR

University of Auckland

THE 'programme' of this book is quite decisively set forth. The blurb: 'This is a social history, not only in those chapters dealing with social relationships, class structure, and demography, but also in chapters that focus on economics, politics, Maori history and cultural events.' The editor fixes its place in the historiographical perspective: 'For the last twenty years, readers have depended