

Whither the Rural Working Class in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand?

IN RECENT years, considerable debate has taken place among social historians, and on occasion sociologists, concerning the relevance of the concept of class for New Zealand history.¹ Nonetheless, consideration has not been given to the possible existence of a *rural* sector of the working class. The presence of class relationships and their precise nature have far-reaching implications for our overall perception of New Zealand history: crucially, how we locate that pivotal period in New Zealand's development—the late nineteenth century—hinges on broader assumptions about the organization of society in New Zealand. For example, the Liberal policies of the 1890s have been taken by W. H. Oliver to represent the decisive reassertion of this country's essential fluidity of social structure, after a brief period when it seemed that it could become more fixed and hardened in inequality.² On the other hand, others such as Erik Olssen argue for the salience of fundamental cleavages in New Zealand society at that time. These conflicting broad orientations have not been explored sufficiently within rural history.

The question of the relevance of class for New Zealand historians has largely revolved around whether extensive social mobility occurred, or alternatively, whether there was significant class conflict. These two aspects to this question have often been seen as in mutual opposition. Mobility has been taken to suggest a lack of classes, and conflict to indicate their presence. What has not been considered carefully enough is that classes may still exist, given mobility and a lack of conflict. This position requires a reconceptualization of class so that it is defined as a structural place in the economy, in Marxist fashion.

1 See the special issue of the *New Zealand Journal of History* (NZJH), XIII, 1 (1979), on social history containing the following: C. Toynbee, 'Class and Social Structure in 19th Century New Zealand', and M. Fairburn, 'Social Mobility and Opportunity in 19th Century New Zealand'. Also see: E. Olssen, 'The "Working Class" in New Zealand', NZJH, VIII, 1 (1974). Idem, 'Social Class in 19th Century New Zealand', *Social Class in New Zealand*, ed. D. Pitt, Auckland, 1977. W.H. Oliver, 'Class in New Zealand', NZJH, VIII, 2 (1974). D.G. Pearson, *Johnsonville: Continuity and Change in a New Zealand Township*, Sydney, 1980, especially Chapter 9. Idem, 'Small-Town Capitalism and Stratification in New Zealand, 1880-1930', NZJH, XIV, 2 (1980).

2 W.H. Oliver, 'Reeves, Sinclair and the Social Pattern', *The Feel of Truth*, ed. P. Munz, Wellington, 1969.

Olssen—the foremost proponent of a ‘class-based’ view, defines class as a conflict group with some degree of consciousness or subculture.³ Classes are groups of people acting in the pursuit of common ends who have similar incomes, occupation, status, etc. For Olssen, the consciousness of shared position is primary, and he uses evidence of conflict, based on different shared positions, in order to argue for the importance of class itself. Class conflict is then cited in support of the relevance of class and the lack of social mobility.

More recent contributions to the debate have come from the sociological quarter, in the writings of D. G. Pearson and C. Toynbee. Their remarks derive from a ‘neo-Weberian’ view of class, which seeks to make more complex a ‘traditional’ Marxist view based on two classes fundamentally opposed at the level of production. Neo-Weberian class theory achieves this in two ways: (a) by the introduction of intermediate, ‘middle’ classes with their own economic capacity relative to the market, and (b) by the mediation of class formation in the market arena by the work situation and local social context of those concerned.⁴ Both Pearson and Toynbee, nonetheless, are forced to modify considerably this perspective in its application to New Zealand history. After all, it was put forward to deal with societies which had become industrialized. New Zealand in the nineteenth century could not be termed an industrialized society. According to Pearson, the effect of work situation, small-scale community and skill and educational differentials was to blur ‘class situation’ through creation of a hierarchy of social stratification consisting of more or less mobile individuals. Social mobility is to be measured with reference to the continuum of economic and political power, and status. If one is to pursue the question of class further, rather than social mobility, it becomes necessary to seek class in observable conflict—‘class formation’ in Pearson’s terms. This is in fact what Olssen does, from a starting point which is similar to the Weberian one.

But this means of conceptualizing class has not focussed sufficiently upon establishing the economic structure within which a ‘blurring’ of class situation and mobility takes place. It would seem difficult to measure the extent of movement without reference to some fixed point. Such reference points are, for Pearson and other neo-Weberians, those of specifiable occupational groupings within the economy—for example, the categories of professional/managerial, clerical, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual, and farming. Such a scheme is useful in locating individuals’ movements within the social hierarchy. But it establishes no more than the rungs of the occupational ladder which people may move up (or down). These categories do not specify the relationships between such occupational positions based on property, skills and education etc., nor do they give us an understanding of the economic structure as a

3 Olssen, ‘The “Working Class” ’ and ‘Social Class’.

4 The work of Giddens is perhaps the best example of this form of class theory. A. Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, London, 1973.

whole. Moreover, occupational analysis tends to omit those with considerable power vested in them by property, for whom their work is less important than their ownership and control of property. These deficiencies are remedied by an analysis of class in terms of structural economic position. By these means we are able to relate and integrate occupational groups within the economic system as a whole, and include those for whom ownership of property is primary.

In this respect Marxist class theory departs from analyses which draw on Weber. The latter do not tell us about the generation and maintenance of fundamental relationships of property which define class. These structural economic relationships precede and underlie the occupational hierarchy and the mobility of individuals within it.⁵ The divisions and relationships between capitalist employer and wage-earner, landowner and tenant, farmer and farm labourer must be considered even if there is social mobility and a lack of overt class conflict. The existence of mobility and the absence of conflict does not preclude the existence of these structural class positions. Such characteristics of a society may tell us many useful things about the way that class, in a Marxist sense, is constructed, mediated, subdivided, masked, or distorted within that society, but they do not in themselves confirm whether classes are present or not.

In this context, Oliver's comments concerning class are more pertinent than those of Olssen, even though Oliver denies that the concept of class is applicable to New Zealand.⁶ Oliver at least is prepared to face up to the implications of applying 'class' to New Zealand—his definition is Marxist (in a loose sense) and is related to clear-cut divisions on the economic basis of property. Looking at class in this way makes it all the more surprising that the foundations of New Zealand society in landed property have not been scrutinized more closely. Is it really true that we can dismiss without hesitation those in the countryside who worked the land but without owning any of it—that is, the rural working class? It is this question that this article seeks to address. Considerable scholarly endeavour has been directed into establishing the pattern of development of landholding, but none into assessing the significance of a rural working class. In 1933, in his seminal article on rural labour in New Zealand, Belshaw was able to state bluntly in one paragraph that there had never been an agricultural proletariat in this country.⁷

5 This reassertion of the importance of structural cleavages based on class from within a Marxist perspective has largely coincided with the rise of a 'structuralist' form of Marxist theory. While not holding to the more extreme consequences of such theory, we can at least establish that we may forego a focus upon individuals and their socio-economic position or mobility, for the structural economic constraints within which such individuals find themselves. See N. Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, London, 1975, pp.28-35.

6 Oliver, 'Class', p.163.

7 H. Belshaw, 'Agricultural Labour in New Zealand', *International Labour Review*, XXVIII, (1933). This article is reprinted in *Agricultural Organisation in New Zealand*, eds. H. Belshaw, D.O. Williams et al, Melbourne, 1936.

In part, this very common conclusion is itself related to the above conceptions of class. Historians have not found (and also probably have not looked hard for) significant instances of rural conflict based on class and have therefore tended to dismiss summarily the existence of a rural working class. This conclusion is readily reinforced by a consensus that the Wakefieldian vision of colonization failed miserably, and that land was comparatively freely available and accessible to those who wanted it. Only for a brief time and in certain provinces did the shadow of the large pastoralists threaten to sully the rural arcadia. Consequently, those social historians who were concerned to bring to light the history of the working class in New Zealand turned their eyes towards the towns. Questions of class conflict, trade unionism, unemployment, and working class politics became identified with the urban economy.⁸ This occurred in spite of the importance of the rural economy for New Zealand as a whole, and the dependence of the urban economy upon it.

More recently, it has been suggested that the large-scale pastoral economy was perhaps more durable than had been thought. Anthony Ward has suggested that larger landholding remained important into the twentieth century, because of the rise of estates in the 5-10,000 acre category.⁹ S. Eldred-Grigg has postulated that the South Island gentry did not suffer overmuch from either the land policy of Liberal governments or depressed agricultural prices.¹⁰ But, the implications of the continued presence of large estates in New Zealand's rural economy for those who worked on the land have not been examined.

What we must establish to begin with is the extent to which the rural economy in New Zealand was reliant upon wage-labour. If this was considerable, then account should be taken of the structural position of the labourer in the rural economy. This would involve assessing the significance of the wage-earner for agrarian production in its various facets—arable, pastoral, dairying, etc.—in terms of its organization and its financial viability, and the changes therein. How was it, for example, that farmers in the nineteenth century could deplore the scarcity and price of labour and yet there be considerable unemployment and demands for higher wages? How did the labour market provide for the

8 Focus upon the urban context is generally true of Olssen's work cited above in footnote 1. It is also true of Campbell's work. R.J. Campbell, 'The Black "Eighties"—Unemployment in New Zealand in the 1880's', *Australian Economic History Review*, XVI, (1976). Idem, 'Unemployment in New Zealand, 1874-1914', Unpublished M.Phil. thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North, 1976. Although stressing the seasonal nature of unemployment, Campbell fails to link unemployment sufficiently into the rural economy. He argues that 'in the main unemployment was an urban problem for urban workers', *ibid.*, p.19.

9 A. Ward, 'The New Zealand Gentry, 1890-1910: Twilight or Indian Summer?', *Australian Economic History Review*, XIX, (1979). J.D. Gould, 'The Twilight of the Estates, 1891 to 1910', *Australian Economic History Review*, X, (1970).

10. S. Eldred-Grigg, 'Whatever Happened to the Gentry?', *NZJH*, XI, 1 (1977). Idem, *A Southern Gentry: New Zealanders who Inherited the Earth*, Wellington, 1980.

extensive seasonal demands for country work, given a 'scarcity' of labour? What role did mechanisation play in relation to rural work? Why did rural unionism fail to make a strong impact, if rural labour was important? What was the precise relationship between the farmer and his employees? These and other questions are important, but have been neglected because the importance of rural wage-earners has not been fully appreciated. In order to answer such questions, we must first establish the size and nature of the rural labouring population. After assessing the structural economic basis for rural labour, it is possible to examine questions concerning social mobility and class conflict.

When we examine the statistical basis for assessing the importance of rural labour we immediately come up against the problem of occupational classification. Some historians, such as Miles Fairburn, argue that the whole project of analyzing New Zealand society historically by way of occupation be abandoned.¹¹ He suggests that we turn to the hierarchy of property instead. At first glance, such an approach might seem very appropriate, especially for a Marxist analysis. But this is not in fact the case. Fairburn's sweeping rejection of occupational analysis incapacitates any attempt to understand New Zealand social structure. How are we to measure the structured effects of ownership of property if not by occupation? Economic resources are realized in relation to a specified economic system and through an occupational division of labour in that system. These remarks are especially pertinent for those who have no property (apart from their capacity to labour), whose importance lies in the work that they do. Occupational analysis allows us direct access to these groups which constitute the working class. The one numerically small but important group whose significance is not made sufficiently apparent by way of occupational classification includes those who make a living purely from their ownership of property. If one remains within the confines of social structure defined narrowly by occupation, this group tends to be neglected. By contrast, study of occupation is essential for analysis of the working class. We now examine occupational statistics for the nineteenth century, gathered by the New Zealand government in its censuses.

11 Fairburn cites as evidence of the uselessness of occupational classification the words of the Registrar-General himself in his introductory Reports to the nineteenth century censuses. However, such comments were reiterated without significant alteration in each census from 1867 onwards. Even earlier, difficulties of classification were noted for the 1858 census. By 1874, those administering the census were more sensitive to the problems involved in classification. People were instructed explicitly to enter those 'occupations followed and deriving income from at the time of the census'. Only at that point was a very detailed system introduced. We may therefore interpret these apparently disturbing remarks more as a standardized disclaimer than an expression of fundamental scepticism of the resulting figures. Even modern statisticians would express certain reservations about classificatory systems for occupation. Despite inevitable failings, we must continue to use such an essential source for socio-economic structure.

In essence, we can analyse occupational statistics in two discrete periods—1874-1886 and 1891-1911. (Analysis is carried through to the census of 1911, a convenient benchmark for New Zealand agrarian history.) Before 1874, no occupational statistics useful for our purposes were collected. Only the broad category 'Agricultural and Pastoral' was used, allowing no access to rural labourers or wage-earners.

From 1874, a detailed system of classification was introduced based on the English system devised by Dr Farr in 1851.¹² The New Zealand government adopted the revised version of 1861 which produced six 'Classes' organized by the type of material dealt with by the labour-force. Occupation was further broken down by fifteen 'Orders' and sixty-one 'Sub-Orders'. In Class IV 'Agricultural' there were four sub-orders: respectively, engaged in agricultural pursuits, engaged in pastoral pursuits, engaged on the land (not cultivating or grazing), and engaged about animals. Further, each sub-order was broken down into detailed occupational specifications. In Class IV, these numbered twenty-seven. Dr Farr's method of classification by material handled proved a rather arbitrary means of allocating people within classes, and gave rise to a large and ill-defined residual category—Class VI 'Indefinite and Non-Productive'. Within this category were placed all labourers who had failed adequately to indicate the material they worked with. Between 3.8 and 4.5 per cent of the total population were so classified in the period 1874-1886. This poses difficulties for estimation of those labouring in the rural sector of the economy in general.

Nevertheless, from the detailed occupational specifications it is possible to generate a measure of the core of the rural labouring population in both the agricultural (arable) and the pastoral sectors. We may simply add together the numbers enumerated in the 'farm servant and labourers' category within Sub-Order 1, and those in the 'station or grazing farm servant and labourer' within Sub-Order 2, of Class IV.¹³

From 1891 the occupational classification system was substantially revised by the disappearance of the ill-defined 'indefinite and Non-

¹² *New Zealand Standard Classifications of Occupations* (NZCO), Department of Statistics, Wellington. Great Britain, Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, *Guide to Census Reports, 1801-1966, Great Britain*, London, 1977. Censuses of New Zealand, 1874-1911, Wellington. The introductory report of each census has an excellent discussion of the occupational classification implemented.

¹³ A wider definition of the rural working class might include the following: from Class IV, 'agricultural implement owner/worker' (most of whom were in fact labourers, as is indicated by Employment Status tabulation), and 'grubber or bushman'; from Class V 'Industrial', 'fencer, splitter'; and from Class VI 'Indefinite and Non-Productive', a large proportion of those in the category 'general labourer'. The most significant category is the last, but we have no means of estimating the numbers of general labourers involved in the rural economy. After 1886, the ill-defined Class VI disappeared through absorption into other categories. However, this change did not result in a major increase in the figures for rural labour in 1891 (see Table 1). This indicates that the effect of inclusion of a proportion of those in Class VI before 1891 is probably slight.

Productive' class and the enlarging of the 'Agricultural' class to include other primary producers.¹⁴ However, the organizational principles remained the same. For the period 1891-1911, I have persisted with the same core definition, that is the inclusion of farm servants and labourers, and station or grazing farm servants, shearers, and labourers. To these groups are added those classified as dairy assistants, labourers, milkers, and milkmaids—labourers in the newly emergent dairying sector.

From 1891 onwards, the New Zealand government also produced comprehensive statistics on Employment Status. This gives us figures by occupation for the following groups: employers, self-employed, wage-earners, relatives assisting without wages, and unemployed wage-earners. It might be thought that these statistics give us an easy and more direct means of assessing the strength of the rural working class. This is not the case. These statistics cannot be used without qualification, since salaried employees and those in supervisory and management positions who are paid in wages are included among wage-earners. As a result, in terms of employment status, farm managers, clerks and overseers cannot be distinguished from other wage-earners, when occupationally the two groups are clearly demarcated. Nonetheless, employment status figures generally confirm the broad trend evident in the occupational figures. Table 1 summarizes the growth in the number of rural labourers and rural wage-earners in the period 1874-1886 and 1891-1911, according to the two measures discussed.

It must be said that any definition based on contemporary census classifications inevitably fails to take account of many who were rural labourers, at least on a seasonal basis. Apart from 1874 and 1878, the censuses were taken at the end of March and in early April of the year concerned, when there was little demand for extra seasonal labour. For the information on occupation and employment status people were instructed to enter that currently followed at the time of the census. The census cannot tell us anything about those from towns and in other occupations who took up work in the countryside in order to supplement their income at harvest- and shearing-time, nor those already on the land classified as 'farmer' but who turned to wage-labour for part of the year. The above figures, however, do give us at least a minimum estimate of the core present in rural paid labour.

14 The pertinent changes in classification that occurred were that the 'Indefinite and Non-Productive' category was broken up and redistributed among other classes, while the 'Agricultural' category was enlarged. In large part, redistribution involved allocating labourers (otherwise ill-defined) to the 'Industrial' and the newly-created 'Agricultural, Pastoral, Mineral, and Other Primary Producers' categories, now Classes IV and V respectively. Revision of the system also gave rise to expansion of its subdivisions—there were now some twenty-four orders and 103 sub-orders, within which were large numbers of detailed occupations. In 1901 the number of occupational classes was expanded by one with the introduction of a new class 'Transport and Communication'. The 'Agricultural, etc.' class then became Class VI.

TABLE 1
Numbers of Rural Labourers in New Zealand in Terms of
Occupation and Employment Status for the Periods
1874-1886 and 1891-1911

Census Year	Occupation	Employment Status
1874	10,857	—
1878	16,408	—
1881	16,607	—
1886	18,573	—
1891	20,491	26,212
1896	27,403	32,606
1901	28,484	33,448
1906	31,755	36,103
1911	36,025	41,068

Note: Employment Status figures for rural labourers include unemployed wage-earners, tabulated separately in the census from 1896.

In order to assess the importance of rural labourers in the economy of New Zealand we must locate them relative to the wider economic structure. Specifically, we can compare the numbers of rural labourers with the rural labour-force as a whole and New Zealand's labour-force in total, in all sectors. Note that the measure by occupation is used, unless otherwise specified. The rural labour-force must be defined specifically for each period tabulated (1874-1886 and 1891-1911), because of the changes made in occupational classification in 1891.¹⁵ These definitions provide a relatively consistent measure of the rural labour-force centred on agricultural and pastoral pursuits. A similar process of definition must be followed for the total labour-force in New Zealand for the two periods.¹⁶ The resulting figures are given in Table 2.

15 For the period 1874-1886, the rural labour-force is defined as all occupations within Class IV, 'Agricultural'. From 1891 the agricultural class was revised to include 'other primary producers' outside our concern. This new Class V, 'Agricultural, Pastoral, Mineral and Other Primary Producers' takes in fisheries, forestry, mining, etc. In the period 1891-1911 the rural labour-force is defined as all occupations within suborders 1 and 2 (agricultural and pastoral pursuits) of Class V, thereby excluding suborders 3 to 6 which concern other inapplicable occupations.

16 In the period 1874-1886 the total labour-force consists of all those with occupations stated except Class II, Order 3. This order of 'dependents' in Class II consists of the following: wives and widows of no specified occupation; sons, daughters, relatives and visitors (not otherwise specified); and scholars. For the later period 1891-1911 the total labour-force consists of all those with occupations specified, except those within Class VII, 'Dependents (non-Breadwinners)'.

TABLE 2

The Rural Labour-Force and Total Labour-Force in New Zealand,
1874-1911

Census Year	Numbers		Rural Labour-Force	
	Rural Labour-Force	Total Labour-Force	As % of Total Labour-Force	As % of Total Population
1874	34,390	125,017	27.5	11.6
1878	47,967	166,192	28.9	11.6
1881	54,447	191,514	28.4	11.2
1886	65,178	225,561	28.9	11.3
1891	68,607	252,763	27.1	11.0
1896	83,300	292,932	28.4	11.9
1901	89,222	340,570	26.2	11.6
1906	96,957	399,318	24.3	10.9
1911	110,025	454,417	24.2	10.9

Note: New Zealand's total labour force includes the residual category—those without specified occupation.

Throughout the nineteenth century New Zealand's population distribution shifted markedly in favour of the towns. In the forty years between 1871 and 1911 the rural population fell from over three-quarters to less than half the total population.¹⁷ But this shift did not imply any lessening of the importance of the rural sector of the economy in terms of the numbers employed (the rural labour-force). As Table 2 makes clear the rural sector maintained its position in these terms. The rural labour-force remained about eleven per cent of the total population and about one-quarter of the total labour-force.

There was some small decline at the beginning of the twentieth century relative to the labour-force as a whole. This could reflect the increasing importance of the smaller farm dependent upon family labour which remains unrecorded in terms of occupation. It certainly did not occur as a result of any shift in the place of labourers/wage-earners in the rural economy. When we compare the number of rural labourers with the total labour-force and the rural labour-force, its stable position is clear. Rural labourers remained a consistent eight to ten per cent of the total labour-force and twenty-nine to thirty-four per cent of the rural labour-force, as Table 3 depicts.

¹⁷ *New Zealand Census, 1871 and 1911.*

TABLE 3
Rural Labourers as a Percentage of New Zealand's
Total Labour-Force and Rural Labour-Force, 1874-1911

Census Year	As % of Total Labour-Force	As % of Rural Labour-Force
1874	8.7	31.6
1878	9.9	34.2
1881	8.7	30.5
1886	8.2	28.5
1891	8.1	29.9
1896	9.4	32.9
1901	8.4	31.9
1906	8.0	32.7
1911	7.9	32.7

Indeed, at the end of the period there was a slight increase in the relative importance of rural labourers in the rural labour-force.

In general we may conclude that the expansion in numbers of rural labourers occurred at the same rate as did the expansion of those occupied both in the rural and entire economy of New Zealand. This happened even though New Zealand's population was increasingly located in towns. Rural labourers constituted an important and enduring component of the economy. Throughout the period they comprised just under one-third of the rural labour-force while the latter itself comprised more than one-quarter of the total labour-force. Given that we have taken only a narrow definition of rural labourers, these figures become even more significant. Unfortunately, attention has been focussed upon the breaking-up of large estates, the increased availability of land and the increased financial viability of the family farm in the latter part of the period concerned. These concerns have perhaps overshadowed any continuing importance that rural workers without land might have had. It has been assumed that if the rural working class had existed at all, it was surely eroded away by the turn of the century. But the above figures indicate that the relative importance of rural labour did not diminish in this period. This being the case, the precise position and nature of rural labouring in New Zealand would seem to require further exploration.

So far we have examined rural labour only in terms of a broad aggregate. As the above discussion of occupational classification suggests, we are able to break down these figures by sector. For the period 1874-1886 the distinction can be made between the agricultural and pastoral sectors in Suborders 1 and 2 of Class IV; that is, between arable

farming and pasture grazing. Both the rural labour-force and rural labourers may be divided up according to this distinction, within the census occupational tables.¹⁸ In the later period dairying is first introduced as a separate and significant sector in the census tables. This addition gives rise to a subdivision of the 'pastoral' sector into sheep (and cattle) grazing, and dairying. The term 'pastoral' will be retained to describe all pastoral farming apart from dairying. The numbers involved in dairying were in fact statistically insignificant until the census of 1901. This gives rise to three sectors for the period 1891-1911—agricultural, pastoral and dairying. Analysis of rural labourers by sector establishes that the agricultural sector dominated over the other sectors numerically. As Table 4 indicates, until 1911 the former comprised more than two-thirds of the total numbers of rural labourers. For much of the early part of the period (1878-1886) agricultural labourers comprised three-quarters of the total.

TABLE 4

Rural Labourers by Sector, 1874-1911

Census Year	<i>Agricultural</i>		<i>Pastoral</i>		Total
	Nos.	% of Total	Nos.	% of Total	
1874	7,426	68.4	3,431	31.6	10,857
1878	12,560	76.5	3,848	23.5	16,408
1881	12,544	75.5	4,063	24.5	16,607
1886	13,996	75.4	4,577	24.6	18,573

Census Year	<i>Agricultural</i>		<i>Pastoral</i>		<i>Dairying</i>		Total
	Nos.	% of Total	Nos.	% of Total	Nos.	% of Total	
1891	13,749	67.1	6,429	31.4	313	1.5	20,491
1896	20,236	73.8	6,742	24.6	425	1.6	27,403
1901	19,749	69.3	7,662	26.9	1,073	3.8	28,484
1906	21,566	67.9	8,742	27.5	1,447	4.6	31,755
1911	18,321	50.9	12,842	35.6	4,862	13.5	36,025

This finding might seem surprising given the emphasis firstly on wool-growing and then on sheep-meat production in this period of New

18 The total labour-force in each sector is defined as follows. In agriculture it consists of all those occupations within Class V, suborder 1 (agricultural pursuits). The dairying labour-force consists of the following occupations within suborder 2 (pastoral pursuits): dairy-farmer, relative assisting, milker, dairymaid, dairy assistant, labourer and others connected with dairy. The pastoral labour-force comprises all other occupations in the same suborder 2. Labourers within the sectoral labour-force are defined as discussed above in the context of Table 1.

Zealand's history. But, considering that arable cultivation was highly labour intensive it is understandable that this sector should dominate in terms of labour.

Table 5 considers labourers in relation to the labour-force in the various sectors. This suggests stability in the first part of the period (1874-1886), followed by considerable change in pastoralism and the emergence of dairying.

TABLE 5
Labourers as a Percentage of the
Labour-Force in Sectors of the Rural Economy, 1874-1911

Census Year	Agricultural	Pastoral	
1874	28.5	67.6	
1878	33.5	69.8	
1881	29.4	73.3	
1886	27.2	76.3	
Census Year	Agricultural	Pastoral	Dairying
1891	23.3	73.2	*
1896	27.6	73.1	*
1901	29.1	62.1	11.8
1906	31.0	54.7	12.7
1911	33.5	44.4	18.5

*Dairying percentages unreliable because of small numbers.

From 1874 until 1896 labourers dominated the pastoral sector of the rural economy. They comprised two-thirds to three-quarters of the entire labour-force in this sector. From the turn of the century onwards the labour requirements of this sector diminished. At the same time dairying first became significant in terms of labour (see Table 4). These two trends reflect the shift in landholding structure towards smaller family-farm oriented units of production. Not only was dairy production based on the family farm but sheep-farming moved towards more intensive fat-lambing on smaller farms.

But more importantly in terms of labour, it should be noted that agricultural labourers increased as a percentage of the total engaged in this sector from 23.3 per cent to 33.5 per cent. This was associated with the continued numerical dominance by the agricultural sector. This change counterbalanced the relative decreases experienced in the pastoral sector, so that there was no reduction of the relative importance of rural labourers as a whole in the economy, as indicated in Table 5. This sectoral analysis suggests that we must reassess the view of nineteenth century agrarian history which acknowledges labourers only in the context

of sheep-farming. The bulk of rural labourers were involved in arable cultivation.

For the latter part of our period we are able to examine the composition of the labour-force in some detail. Employment status statistics were gathered from the 1891 census onwards. These enable us to ascertain the relative proportions of the various groups—employers, wage-earners, self-employed, and unpaid relatives assisting—within the rural labour-force at large. Sectoral analysis by employment status, as provided in Table 6, helps in establishing the trends at work.

TABLE 6
Employment Status of Rural Labour-Force by Sector, 1891-1911
(Percentages)

A: Agricultural

Census Year	<i>Wage Component</i>		<i>Family Component</i>		Labour-Force Total No.
	Employer	Wage- Earners	Self- Employed	Unpaid Relatives	
1891	17.3	32.7	18.4	31.6	59,058
1896	18.8	34.4	23.7	23.1	73,221
1901	20.1	35.7	24.8	19.4	67,766
1906	22.9	36.0	23.4	17.7	69,557
1911	17.8	41.0	26.0	15.2	54,738

B: Pastoral

Census Year	<i>Wage Component</i>		<i>Family Component</i>		Labour-Force Total No.
	Employers	Wage- Earners	Self- Employed	Unpaid Relatives	
1891	11.3	76.6	3.9	8.2	8,784
1896	12.1	77.8	6.3	3.8	9,224
1901	15.7	66.0	12.6	5.7	12,329
1906	16.6	60.1	11.4	11.9	15,995
1911	19.8	47.6	19.8	12.8	28,939

C: Dairying

Census Year	<i>Wage Component</i>		<i>Family Component</i>		Labour-Force Total No.
	Employers	Wage- Earners	Self- Employed	Unpaid Relatives	
1891	20.1	22.8	24.7	32.4	765
1896	18.9	28.1	24.0	29.0	855
1901	17.0	11.8	34.8	36.4	9,081
1906	21.1	12.7	41.8	24.5	11,405
1911	17.2	18.5	37.8	26.6	26,348

Note: The category 'wage-earners' includes unemployed wage-earners, tabulated separately in the census tables from 1896.

In the above table each sector has been divided into sections which roughly correspond to the division between units of production requiring paid labour and those based on the family. This allows us to assess the importance of the wage-relation. From Table 6 we may make the following points regarding each sector. In the agricultural sector there was significant change in the proportions of those engaged in larger farms based on the wage-relation and those engaged in family farms. From 1891 to 1911 the former rose from half the total to nearly sixty per cent of the total. This change was due to the relative expansion of numbers of wage-earners rather than employers. It suggests, perhaps, that the average size of agricultural farms was increasing. Within the family farm group the relative proportions of self-employed and unpaid relatives assisting virtually reversed itself. This may indicate the increasing integration of such farms within the market, and the shedding of relatives for work in the expanding towns.

The pastoral sector evidences a steady decline in the importance of wage-earners from a peak of more than three-quarters to less than half the labour-force. Implicit in the figures for this sector is a trend to smaller farms. This is reflected in the increased proportion of employers, self-employed, and unpaid relatives to the whole. These smaller units of production required less paid labour. Nevertheless, even in 1911 wage-earners comprised nearly half of the labour-force in this sector; earlier in the 1890s they totally dominated the pastoral labour-force.

We are not adequately able to consider figures for dairying until 1901, by which time the labour-force was sufficiently large numerically. We may note the dominance of family farming in this sector but cannot make detailed observations without an extension of the figures to incorporate later censuses. Nonetheless, by the end of the period we are considering dairying had achieved a position of importance.

By extracting the figures for wage-earners and employers from Table 6, we can construct an index of the concentration of rural wage-earners by sector, in terms of the number of wage-earners per one hundred employers. This is presented in Table 7.

TABLE 7
Ratio of Wage-Earners to Employers by Sector, 1891-1911
(Wage-Earners per 100 Employers)

Census Year	Agricultural	Pastoral	Dairying
1891	189	679	*
1896	183	654	*
1901	178	422	69
1906	157	366	60
1911	230	235	107

*Dairying ratio unreliable because of small numbers.

The dominant trend in the pastoral sector is clearly identifiable, while that in agriculture is less clear-cut. Reference to the latter in Table 6 establishes a significant increase in the proportion of wage-earners to the total. But, in the years 1901 and 1906 the proportion of employers to the total increased also. This is reflected in a decline in the index for this sector in Table 7. It is difficult to suggest reasons for these fluctuations without detailed study of the fortunes of arable farming. What we can say is that overall the significance of the wage-relation increased in this sector, as is manifest in Table 6 and in the increased index for 1911 in Table 7.

These figures on employment status reinforce the finding that agricultural labour was of increased importance within the labour-force in this sector, while pastoral labour's importance was reduced. But, by the end of the period, pastoral labour still formed nearly half of the total sectoral labour-force. This situation, together with the increases in agricultural labour, maintained the overall place of rural labour within the rural economy as a whole. The importance of paid rural labour was retained into the twentieth century.

Having considered rural labour in New Zealand as a whole, we turn to examine its regional distribution. Is it pertinent to think of New Zealand in terms of various regional economies in the nineteenth century, as Oliver suggests?¹⁹ Is it possible that the economies of specific parts of New Zealand were more heavily dependent on the existence of rural class relations? Eldred-Grigg argues that certain, predominantly South Island, provinces were dominated by a 'landed gentry'. Where we find a 'landed gentry' might not we also find a concentration of rural wage-earners?

We are fortunate in being able to obtain provincial figures for rural labour from the censuses of 1878, 1881 and 1886, conveniently situated in the middle of the period under consideration. As a starting point, we may make a rough division between provinces in which large, extensive sheep-farms were a feature and those based on smaller farm units. We might expect that stronger control was established over land by larger landowners in the former than the latter. Table 8 shows the clear division between these two types in terms of the importance of rural labourers. In those provinces in which large-scale sheep farming was important labourers formed between one-third and one-half of the provincial rural labour-force. In other provinces the proportion was not much more than one-fifth. On average, the concentration of rural labourers in the former was almost double that in the latter.

19 W.H. Oliver, *Towards a New History?*, (Hocken Lecture, 1969), Dunedin 1971.

TABLE 8
Rural Labourers: Numbers and Percentage of the
Rural Labour Force, by Province, 1878-1886

A: Provinces characterized by extensive sheep-farming

Census Year	Hawke's Bay		Marl- borough		Canter- bury		Otago		Average % of Rural Labour- Force
	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	
1878	965	48.1	450	42.0	4,947	38.9	5,671	42.5	41.3
1881	1,089	47.0	547	37.7	4,548	35.1	5,374	36.5	38.5
1886	1,154	38.5	587	37.1	5,568	36.3	5,706	33.1	35.0

B: Other Provinces

Census Year	Auckland		Taranaki		Wellington		Nelson		Westland		Average % of Rural Labour- Force
	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	
1878	1,831	20.2	276	19.4	1,560	30.1	579	23.1	103	19.1	23.2
1881	2,374	21.0	343	16.6	1,660	25.8	561	20.8	75	16.3	21.9
1886	2,350	17.6	334	11.5	2,170	26.9	604	19.5	81	15.4	19.8

When the sectoral distribution of rural labourers is examined as in Table 9, two separate sub-groups are clearly evident in provinces characterized by large landownership. In Hawke's Bay and Marlborough, pastoral labourers significantly outweighed those in the arable sector. Canterbury and Otago were, by contrast, dominated by labourers in the arable/agricultural sector.

TABLE 9
Numbers of Rural Labourers in Provinces by Sector, 1878-1886

Cen- sus Year	Hawke's Bay		Marlborough		Canterbury		Otago	
	Agricul- tural	Pas- toral	Agricul- tural	Pas- toral	Agricul- tural	Pas- toral	Agricul- tural	Pas- toral
1878	351	614	180	270	4,067	880	4,491	1,180
1881	358	731	233	314	3,705	843	4,107	1,267
1886	348	806	236	351	4,504	1,064	4,497	1,209

These figures confirm that, while the economies of Hawke's Bay and Marlborough were primarily dependent upon the extensive pasturing of sheep, in Canterbury and Otago large-scale arable farming was important alongside wool-growing. The relative concentration of rural labour (refer Table 8) in Hawke's Bay and Marlborough was due to the high proportion of labourers to the total labour-force in the sheep-farming sector (refer Table 5). In the 1880s, in this sector, labourers formed about three-quarters of the total labour force. The high concentrations

found in Canterbury and Otago, although partially due to the same reason, were more a result of the extensive development of large arable farms.

Relative to New Zealand as a whole the concentration of rural labour in Canterbury and Otago was marked indeed. Approximately sixty per cent of the total number was to be found in these two provinces (see Table 10 below). This would suggest that a closer examination of their economy is required. Here, I shall focus primarily on Canterbury whose agrarian history is relatively well-documented.

TABLE 10
Rural Labourers in the Provinces of Canterbury and Otago,
1878-1886

Census Year	N.Z. Total No.	% of Total in Canterbury	% of Total in Otago
1878	16,408	30.3	34.6
1881	16,607	27.4	32.4
1886	18,573	30.0	30.7

In the province of Canterbury during the 1880s both the pastoral and crop-based agrarian economies reached their heights.²⁰ After tardy settlement in the 1850s, the South Island rapidly rose to dominate New Zealand's rural economy as a whole. By the 1860s, some 80 per cent of the total acreage under crops and a similar percentage of New Zealand's sheep were located in the South Island, overwhelmingly in Canterbury and Otago.²¹ Through the following two decades this dominance became even more accentuated, especially in arable cultivation. By 1881, over 90 per cent of land under crop was in the South Island; Canterbury alone contributed more than half of the total acreage in New Zealand. The South Island largely retained its position in the pastoral economy as well, with nearly 70 per cent of New Zealand's sheep in Canterbury and Otago.

Canterbury's rural economy was marked by both large-scale arable and pastoral farming. From the 1870s until the turn of the century, so-called 'bonanza farms' producing grain surpluses in Canterbury made it

²⁰ Comments on Canterbury's rural economy are based on the following sources: W.J. Gardner, *A History of Canterbury*, II, 1854-76, Christchurch, 1971. W.H. Scotter, *A History of Canterbury*, III, 1876-1950, Christchurch, 1965. R.P. Hargreaves, 'Speed the Plough: An Historical Geography of New Zealand Farming before the Introduction of Refrigeration', 2 vols, Dunedin, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Otago, Dunedin, 1966. B.J.G. Thompson, 'The Canterbury Farm Labourers' Dispute, 1907-1908, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 1967.

²¹ These figures are based on the following sources: Hargreaves, II, pp.356-60. Eldred-Grigg, *Southern Gentry*, ch.4. New Zealand Census, 1881.

increasingly unprofitable for other (particularly North Island) grain-producers to compete with them.²² The advantages of a more favourable climate, larger units of production, and mechanization enabled Canterbury farms to produce large amounts of grain cheaply and to export their produce. In 1881, over half a million acres or some 35 per cent of the total land cultivated in the province was under crops.²³ Nearly half this area was devoted to wheat. Canterbury produced over 60 per cent of New Zealand's wheat; over half of its barley; more than a third of its oats; and over one-quarter of its potatoes. Mechanization was considerable—multiple-furrow ploughs were common, as were combined reaper-binders, and steam threshing machines.

After some twenty years of extremely rapid expansion in the pasturing of sheep, this extensive form of land utilization had reached its limits in Canterbury by the 1870s. Much of the land was devoted to huge sheep-runs. By the following decade there was a movement towards the pasturing of sheep in the more intensive mixed-farming areas which had expanded inland from the coastal plains, and supplanted the purely pastoral runs to some degree. Nevertheless, the pastoral component of Canterbury's economy remained dominant in terms of land usage; many large lowland mixed farms pastured large flocks. As Eldred-Grigg documents, the large runholders consolidated their position at this time through the creation of a society based on extreme inequality in landed property, in political power, and in status.

The work experience of rural wage-earners in Canterbury was structured by the dominance of these two types of farming—large intensively worked arable farms producing grain surpluses, and extensive pastoral runs. We may distinguish between some four distinct forms of work experience produced by two intersecting axes—permanent/seasonal work, and the arable/pastoral sectors.²⁴ Firstly, there was the work required by permanent sheep-station hands—shepherding, fencing, and general tending of sheep—supplemented by the semi-permanent mustering work (musterers were often employed for about half the year). Labour was most concentrated (relative to employers) in this sector. Secondly, during the intense period of shearing the number of station hands more than doubled temporarily by the arrival of travelling gangs of shearers and ancillary workers who moved progressively southwards from run to run, following the shearing season. Thirdly, the arable sector required permanent workers such as ploughmen for farms cultivating more than a hundred acres. To these workers was added a tremendous influx of seasonal labour involved in harvesting. This structured labour market was augmented by the considerable need for casual and contract

22 Hargreaves, II, pp.356-60, 374-82.

23 New Zealand Statistics, 1881, with Abstracts from the Agricultural Statistics of 1882.

24 A certain amount is known of the work which both permanent and seasonal pastoral labourers undertook, largely through the eyes of their superiors. See the numerous studies of South Island sheep runs.

labour for specific jobs such as ploughing, rabbiting, land drainage and clearance, etc. Such irregular work could always be supplied from the ranks of migrant swaggers.

The axes defined above were, nonetheless, the basic determinant of the work experience of rural labourers. This is reflected in the fact that there were distinct moves towards unionization among the individual groups demarcated by these axes. The specific interests of those such as shearers, drovers and musterers, threshing mill hands, and general agricultural labourers were expressed in their own attempts to organize their ranks.

Classification by occupation in the censuses undoubtedly concentrated upon the permanent rural workers, although seasonal workers who remained in shifting rural work throughout the year would also be included. However, many seasonal workers probably were not classified as rural labourers. Because of the large units of production in both the agricultural and the pastoral sectors, seasonal demand for labour would have been much higher in Canterbury (and Otago) than elsewhere. We should also remember that these two provinces, on account of their enormous numbers of sheep, drew much shearing labour from outside. Shearers moved from the North to the South Island in large numbers. For these reasons, a larger proportion of Canterbury's total seasonal rural-work-force would have been absent from the census occupational figures than for other provinces. The figures given for Canterbury in Table 8 therefore underestimate to a higher extent than elsewhere the entirety of rural labour.

Because much of Canterbury farm labour was seasonal, a marked insecurity and instability was built into the rural work-force. The fact that so many rural labourers had to shift from job to job and migrate in a search for work did not so much indicate a general desire for mobility and unattached labour in a 'land of opportunity' but was more sheer necessity. The irregular nature and the lack of stability of much rural work was part and parcel of New Zealand's undeveloped and only newly-emergent economy. For the working class, as W.B. Sutch has cogently argued, this spelt only insecurity which gnawed away constantly at their existence.²⁵ It was the permanent rural work which was relatively well paid, when all is considered, and which offered the labourer security, if at the same time, dependence upon his master.²⁶ Apart from shearers, who held a strong bargaining position and were well organized, seasonal

25 W.B. Sutch, *The Quest for Security in New Zealand, 1840 to 1966*, London, 1966. In pp.88-93 Sutch argues that the instability of much employment in New Zealand was important in establishing the Old Age Pension's non-contributory nature.

26 Casual rates of pay, if maintained throughout the year, would have matched the pay in the hand of permanent workers. But, these rates reflected the *temporary* urgent demand for labour in conditions of general labour scarcity. Earnings averaged over the full year would have been considerably less. Secondly, permanent workers were normally 'found', that is provided with board and lodging. Fairburn, p.53n., estimates that this virtually doubled their pay. For this reason also, comparison of nominal wage-rates does not reflect the real gap between permanent and casual workers.

and casual workers did not have the same advantages.

Unemployment in Canterbury in the 1880s—a time of general depression for the New Zealand economy—was exacerbated by the inherent insecurity and underemployment of much rural labour. This province became the centre of the unemployment problem of the time.²⁷ Yearly peaks in unemployment derived directly from the fall-off in demand for seasonal rural labour in winter. Unemployment hit the casual and unskilled labourer the hardest. In Canterbury, difficulties caused by bad harvests and inferior wool clips were added to the more generalized problems of depression. From 1879 onwards and as late as 1894, Christchurch became the focus of the nation's employment difficulties.

The history of rural unionism in New Zealand indicates the centrality of Canterbury together with Otago.²⁸ From the 1870s onwards, the struggle to create a shearers' union was based in these two provinces. It was the intervention of the Australian shearing union (the A.S.U.) in 1886 which saw Canterbury and Otago first organized on a permanent basis. After many vicissitudes in the late 1880s, the shearers' union began to extend its membership to Southland and to the North Island in 1892. By 1894, the organization could claim to be nationally based with almost three thousand members in both islands. In 1900 the union was registered with the Arbitration Court. In the first decade of the twentieth century, other seasonal workers such as musterers, packers, and threshing mill hands were extended recognition by the Court. Their organizations were also firmly rooted in Canterbury and Otago.

However, the attempts of general agricultural (and pastoral) labourers to organize met with less success.²⁹ As with other sectors of the rural work-force, initiative for the unionization of this group came largely from Canterbury. Moves were first made at the turn of the century. In 1903 this movement coalesced in the formation of the Canterbury Agricultural and Pastoral Labourers' Union and its rapid rise in membership to 1,500 in 1907. At that time the union applied to the Arbitration Court for an award, but was refused in a bitterly fought case won by their employers, the Farmers' Union.

It is clear that the New Zealand rural economy remained dependent upon the rural wage-earner into the twentieth century, especially in

27 See Campbell, 'Unemployment', pp.13-24, 42, 54. Scotter, pp.60-5.

28 H. Roth, *Trade Unions in New Zealand: Past and Present*, Wellington, 1973, pp.9-11, 22. J.D. Salmond, 'New Zealand Labour's Pioneering Days', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Auckland, 1950, pp.44-5, 108-9. Idem, 'The History of the New Zealand Labour Movement from the Settlement to the Conciliation and Arbitration Act, 1894', unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Otago, Dunedin, 1924, pp.69-72. R.B. Freitag, 'Farm Labour in New Zealand', unpublished M.C. thesis, Victoria University, Wellington, 1952, pp.105, 141. Also see J. Martin, 'Rural Labour and Class Structure in New Zealand, 1870-1920', SAANZ Conference Paper, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 1981, pp.6-13.

29. See Thompson (1967), especially ch.5.

certain provinces. This rural work-force was a stable component of the economy, and was constantly recreated over time. In the 1870s immigration played a crucial role. From 1880 until 1895 the drawn-out depression and consequent unemployment helped to maintain this work-force for farms. By the end of the century, the government, through the Department of Labour, was playing a role in supplying labour for rural work.³⁰ Moreover, the wider undeveloped character of New Zealand's economy assisted in the maintenance of a pool of unemployed labour which could be deployed in the countryside. The general inherent insecurity and instability of work was ideally suited to the rural economy which required a large influx of seasonal labour for a short period in the year. This suggests the importance of marginal rural workers who would not be recorded as such in census occupational figures.

How does the fact that rural wage-earners remained an important feature square up with views that extensive social mobility occurred? Firstly, it should be observed that very few studies of social mobility in the nineteenth century have been undertaken, and none with a specific focus on rural labourers in New Zealand. Rollo Arnold's recent study emphasizes the upwards movement from rural labouring occupations on arrival in New Zealand, without assessing its representativeness.³¹ The studies of M.A. Pickens and Pearson are concerned with mobility generally, and make little reference to rural labour specifically.³² It is perhaps surprising just how flimsy the empirical basis is for making generalizations on the question of social mobility in general. As Olssen has observed: 'Little is known about the history of vertical and horizontal mobility, social stratification, income distribution, [etc.] . . . When historians have wanted to comment on New Zealand's social structure, they have had to infer its properties from political rhetoric.'³³ Olssen's comments have the same pertinence today.

Given the absence of studies, we should be wary of accepting at face value beliefs that New Zealand was a land of opportunity. Political ideals are no substitute for systematic research. What little research there has been recently tends to indicate that social mobility was largely short range and operated in both directions. Pearson in his Johnsonville study found some inter-generational occupational mobility by manual workers from unskilled to skilled occupations, and across the manual/white collar divide, but he also found a similar rate of downward mobility.³⁴

30 P.J. Gibbons, ' "Turning Tramps into Taxpayers" —The Department of Labour and the Casual Labourer in the 1890s', unpublished M.A. thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North, especially ch.3.

31 R. Arnold, *The Farthest Promised Land: English Villagers, New Zealand Immigrants of the 1870s*, Wellington, 1981, especially Part III.

32 M.A. Pickens, 'Canterbury 1851-81: Demography and Mobility, a Comparative Study', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Washington University, 1974. Pearson, *Johnsonville*, (1980), ch.6.

33 Olssen, 'The "Working Class"', p.44.

34 Pearson, *Johnsonville*, (1980) pp.107-113.

Pickens' study of Canterbury in the period 1851-1881 indicates that intra-generational occupational mobility decreased with time and in conjunction with a diversification of occupational structure.³⁵ Thus while avenues for mobility increased, the level of mobility declined. In fact, movement from general 'labourer' to 'farmer' categories occurred in both directions. Those who successfully moved upwards from labourer to farmer were likely to have been farmers' sons themselves and thus were formerly downwardly mobile.

The empirical evidence on mobility is not, therefore, unequivocally in favour of substantial long-range upward mobility, and possibly suggests significant downward mobility. Such 'skidding' into lower occupational groups would seem to be a necessary correlate of upward mobility, given that rural wage-earners remained significant in the economy. Immigration was not able to supply rural labour requirements on a long-term basis.

The precise extent of mobility awaits further research. So does the exact tempo and nature of such class-based activity as rural unionism. These considerations are beyond the scope of this article. What has been argued here is that the rural labourer must be included for an adequate appreciation of rural social history in New Zealand. To proceed further, it would be necessary to consider more closely the structural axes of the experience of rural labour. We need studies of the work organization on large pastoral and arable farms in the nineteenth century. Already a certain amount of material exists for the former, but none for the latter. Yet the dominant work experience for the rural labourer was of arable cultivation. Such studies are vital in order to ascertain the significance which should be accorded to the rural working class.

JOHN MARTIN

Massey University

35 Pickens, ch.5.