

A New History of Canterbury. By Stevan Eldred-Grigg. John McIndoe, Dunedin, 1982. 252pp., N.Z. price: \$28.95.

A New History of Canterbury is altogether a better book than the provocative but seriously flawed *A Southern Gentry*. Stevan Eldred-Grigg's second major publication is far more judicious and comprehensive than his first. He has obviously learnt from his critics. But maturity has in no sense stifled this young historian's greatest strength: his ability to develop bold arguments in a vigorous and interesting fashion. His new book is also better written than his first because he has heeded Quentin Bell's advice to 'Kill his darlings'. The simpler style of *A New History of Canterbury* enhances the wit, liveliness and panache of Eldred-Grigg's style which too often spilled over into racy journalistic excess in *A Southern Gentry*.

Eldred-Grigg must receive an accolade for dealing another hefty blow to the comfortable New Zealand egalitarian myth which is clung to so tenaciously by historians living in Maori Hill, Fendalton, Karori, and Remuera. Once again he makes it quite clear that nineteenth-century New Zealand society had a high ceiling. The early Canterbury elite, both rural and urban, was very wealthy indeed, even by the standard of Victorian Britain. Eldred-Grigg is very good on the wealthy and rather good on the poor. He certainly highlights the yawning gap between the top and bottom levels of the supposed working man's paradise.

He must be congratulated for his boldness in trying to provide such a comprehensive coverage of Canterbury life. (The title 'New' clearly relates to his shift of focus from political to social and cultural concerns.) As he has revealed elsewhere he has a feel for architecture and fashion and he also has some perceptive things to say about writing and painting. But once he moves into more private areas of Canterburyans' lives, such as sex, he is less convincing.

This is a beautifully produced book of which Brian Turner and John McIndoe can feel justifiably proud. It has eight colour prints (generally well chosen apart from the rather incongruous Binney) and around eighty photographs, and the price is very reasonable indeed. The type-face is also well chosen and the chapters are an ideal length for pleasurable reading. Anyone, anywhere, would be proud to own such a fine and handsome book.

Unfortunately, despite these very real strengths, *A New History of Canterbury* suffers from some rather serious shortcomings.

The slice approach is one way of examining change over time while saving the reader from being subjected to a tedious and detailed chronological approach. Eldred-Grigg chooses the 1870s, the 1920s, and the 1970s. But starting twenty years or so into the story seems rather dubious. Certainly Eldred-Grigg needed to avoid a tiresome re-run of the heroic deeds of the province's founders, especially as the early period is rather well covered in the existing three-volume history of Canterbury. But avoidance of genesis is a dangerous practice for historians. Eldred-Grigg gets into some difficulty because of his decision to omit the first slice. Surely the ideals of the province's founders, the influence of movements such as Toryism and the role played by Wakefield, Godley, Sewell et al., were critically important in explaining why Canterbury developed along the lines it did? A fuller discussion of such matters would have made Eldred-Grigg's demythologizing rather more convincing. He also seems caught up with the present generation of historians' obsession with the later period of development. Important things happened in New Zealand before 1870, yet modern university

students must get the impression that it all began with Vogel. Besides, all good stories should have a beginning.

The other danger with the slice approach is that so much depends on the periods chosen. A history written from say the 1880s, 1930s and 1960s, or 1850s, 1910s and 1950s might have looked rather different. The crucial years of the 1930s are also rather neglected.

Another problem with this book is the term 'Canterbury', which is never satisfactorily defined. The absence of any maps only adds to the confusion. Despite an excellent discussion of the meaning of region in his introduction, which neatly avoids the knots into which geographers are inclined to tie themselves over this matter, Eldred-Grigg fails to define what he means by Canterbury. The result is that Canterbury too often becomes synonymous with New Zealand. Facts and figures are cited as in a vacuum, when so often they simply exemplify national trends. More careful attention to this thorny problem would have helped Eldred-Grigg to discern with a little more precision what is distinctive about Canterbury compared with New Zealand as a whole and the rest of the South Island.

A more serious underlying problem is Eldred-Grigg's continuing credulity. In *A Southern Gentry* he seemed to suffer from a *Truth* headline writer's mentality. It seems that he still has an obsession with the sensational. Observations, which would only raise the eyebrows of professional historians, are deliberately employed to shock the general reader. We have also known for a long time about the Victorians' weakness for opium and multiple sexual standards, but Eldred-Grigg writes with the shocked indignation of a young Lytton Strachey. He compounds this problem by trying to sound authoritative when he has little right even to sound tentative. Many of the subjects that he talks about are so new that there is no research upon which to build generalisations. Eldred-Grigg can only skim the census and speculate. Yet he writes as if students at the University of Canterbury had been delving into the intimate double lives of their forbears for generations. Lack of proper footnoting also creates problems in this area. Certainly popular history does not want to be cluttered up with academic apparatus. But sensible compromises are necessary if we are to produce good popular history. Footnotes tucked away at the end of a book provide an obvious solution to this problem.

The absence of the naive Marxist two-class model which marred *A Southern Gentry* enables Eldred-Grigg to develop a much more satisfying analysis of social structure. This time he makes allowance for the complexities of strata, place, economic activity and timing. Older established districts are portrayed as distinct from pioneer areas and agricultural regions are shown to be quite different from areas where pastoralism was predominant. Eldred-Grigg must also be congratulated for continuing to argue for the ongoing existence of classes and inequality. But his previous research activities make his analysis of rural Canterbury, more satisfying than his examination of urban Canterbury, while he has greater sensitivity for the upper and lower classes than for the middling classes.

Eldred-Grigg's Ashburton County is much more recognisable than his Christchurch. His countryside comes alive and one can sense the rhythms of rural life, even though he has not quite sorted out the complexities of that difficult sociological conundrum, the family farmer. His Christchurch is rather listless and anaemic by comparison. He seems largely oblivious of the vitality of the inner city area and cannot see beyond the grey suburbs. He also tends to skirt over the com-

plex relationship between skilled artisans and persons engaged in non-manual occupations, whether self-employed or white collar. The nuances of status differentiation amongst these urban middling groups largely escape Eldred-Grigg's attention. Furthermore, the impact of changing technology on these community builders, is also generally overlooked. Canterbury, like the rest of New Zealand, was very petit-bourgeois rather than a 'very bourgeois place' by the 1920s.

Eldred-Grigg could also be accused of making anachronistic judgements concerning Christchurch's radical reputation. Ideals espoused by various Liberal and Labour spokesmen may seem rather tame by the standards of the 1980s, but when they are placed in contemporary perspective they appear rather different. Such quintessentially bourgeois people as Tommy Taylor were after all, ardent land nationalists, who caused the local rural establishment to sleep uneasily in their beds. Early Labour leaders were seen as being even more dangerous by the propertied classes. Erik Olssen, Jack Vowles and Elizabeth Plumridge have also shown that the so-called Labour 'moderates' were only mild in comparison with the real fire-brands.

One final criticism. Although Eldred-Grigg provides a satisfactory analysis of local government, and concedes this time around that it was dominated by the middling classes, he still needs to demonstrate in more precise fashion how political activity intersects with economic power and social position at the higher levels. He is quite correct in noting the survival of the so-called 'gentry' families but needed to say more about their switch from direct parliamentary representation to pressure groups and producer boards. Some more detailed analysis of Canterbury's politicians was also called for, and here a table or two would have helped.

Overall, despite these shortcomings, *A New History of Canterbury* is a worthwhile addition to our historical literature. It adds much to the authoritative but rather stolid three-volume 'old' history. And, if nothing else, it will inject some controversy into New Zealand history which is being stifled by a decidedly unhealthy orthodoxy. Research students at the University of Canterbury have had many interesting avenues opened for further research. John McIndoe's enterprise in floating this project must be applauded. Erik Olssen's companion volume on Otago is awaited with keen anticipation.

TOM BROOKING

University of Otago