

The Red and the Gold: An Informal Account of the Waihi Strike, 1912. By Stanley Roche. Oxford University Press, Auckland and Melbourne, 1982. 160pp., Price: \$19.95.

THE WAIHI STRIKE of 1912 aroused fierce passions at the time and has long been considered an important event in New Zealand's history. The defeat of the striking miners, according to most people, destroyed the 'Red' Federation of Labour as an effective organization and persuaded its leaders to seek unity with those who favoured a political path to socialism. Defeat also made clear the importance of political action to those who had toyed with the prospect of achieving socialism by quicker methods while the role of Massey's Reform Party, which became the government during the strike, equipped the labour movement with an indispensable enemy. Most historians have accepted this view. It has also become clear, as supporters of the Federation charged at the time, that Massey's Government used the police to assist the company in reopening the mine and defeating the strike. In New Zealand such partisanship had no precedent, although from a later perspective that itself seems strange. Yet the role of the police during the 'reign of terror' at the end of the strike and their complicity and even participation still arouse outrage. The killing of F. G. Evans, the only fatal casualty of a strike in our history, lent dramatic poignancy to the charges.

No sooner had it ended than this strike became a myth. This book does little to dispel the myth. Roche gives no bibliography but does provide references. Like everybody else who has studied this event she relies heavily on *The Tragic Story of the Waihi Strike* (1913), the Federation's official account, and the Federation's weekly paper, *The Maoriland Worker*. She has, it is true, also read two theses, including a very good study by Philip Rainer.¹ Rainer had used the Company's records and various archival sources as well as *The Maoriland Worker* and the *New Zealand Herald*. Roche relies on his account extensively. It is a pity that the ingenuity devoted to finding photos had not been employed in locating and using other sources. She has not looked at any of the Borough's records, which include newspaper clipping books; she did not find one of the most important sources, the Police Department's newspaper clippings (which include extensive items from the *Waihi Daily Telegraph*); and she has not read Federation of Labour conference reports or other labour journals. Apart from interviews with the children of three miners, she has added little to our understanding of the strike or the town. This material is used, sometimes rather loosely, to embellish the traditional story.

As a result Roche makes many errors, especially in the early chapters. She claims that Tim Armstrong was virtually a 'Red Fed' from birth, fails to grasp that he was Tom Newth's lieutenant, and thus completely distorts the union's character prior to 1909-10. She claims that the attack on competitive contracting dominated the union's concerns in 1908. This is wrong. The problem was that the Arbitration Court decided that contractors did not have to belong to the union. Armstrong's solution was to have the company allow cooperative contracts. The contractors opposed and the men split, the vote in favour of cooperative contracting being 277-211. Nor was Charles Opie on the union's executive in 1908 when the issue of contracting was being debated (these errors appear between pp.34-40). For Roche 'Red Feds' and their enemies battled in Waihi from 1901 until 1912 (although there were no 'Red Feds' in New Zealand before 1908). Not

surprisingly she almost ignores ideology, scarcely mentions the Socialist Party's rapid growth in 1909-12, and ignores the issue of conscription, the union's disastrous foray into municipal politics in 1911, and Pat Hickey's stormy campaign for Ohinemuri in the spring of that year. Nor does she explore the central claims of the 'Red Fed' mythology. She seems to agree that the arbitration unions were promoted by the company and that a majority of engine-drivers favoured the Federation. She does not seem to know that engine-drivers elsewhere had their own union and nowhere treats them seriously (although they published their list of grievances). She slides around the important question of the Federation Executive's attitude to the strike, although it is clear enough that Parry did not have the support he claimed to possess and that a majority were angry that a strike had been called. Nor does she recognize the popularity of a general strike within the Federation and the Waihi union. J. B. King, the major 'Wobbly' in New Zealand, whose lessons on sabotage led to questions being asked in Parliament, belonged to the strike committee and led one of the most powerful factions within the union. Roche ignores all this. Or simply does not know.

Her account of events after August 1912 is much more satisfying and she handles 'Black Tuesday' and 'The Fugitives' well. But by this point the story had become simple. The basic structure of the narrative is now dominated by one conflict and Roche handles confusing incidents, such as the attack on the hall, with more poise and circumspection. Not that all problems are resolved. She assumes that all right-minded people sympathize with the Federationists. 'Following-up' is a lark, and when occasionally she recognizes that the victims did not enjoy it she can claim, as on p.86, that men like Parry had never 'followed-up' in their lives! She also invents detail, often noting the fact in the references. She frequently invents conversations and heralds her guesses about the motives and emotions of participants as facts. Without ever making clear her sources she also prepares for the tragic climax by portraying Evans as 'a quiet and unassuming man', almost scholarly, and claims that the police believed that 'If only more of the strikers were like him the trouble would be cleared up in no time' (p.102). If that had been true it is impossible to explain why the Federation did not make more of the fact after his death. Indeed, as Maurice Shadbolt once said to me, the silence about Evans' character is almost resounding. But here we have invented a happily married man, his wife loving and protective, who only happened to be at the hall because his wife couldn't bear having him underfoot as she battled through the domestic chores (p.117). And she completely fails to understand their opposition to prohibition. Prohibitionists dominated the Auckland branches of the United Labour Party.

This is not a scholarly work and nor can it be classified as history (although the references will persuade most librarians to locate it in Clío's section). It is well written, the photographs are well chosen, but when accurate it tells little not previously told and when original it is often unconvincing or wrong. It seems to be most strange that a book of this sort has been published by a press renowned elsewhere for scholarship. Strange and disappointing.

ERIK OLSEN

University of Otago

1 'Company Town: An Industrial History of the Waihi Gold Mining Company Limited, 1888-1912', M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1976.