

*Julius Vogel: Business Politician.* By Raewyn Dalziel. Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1986. 368pp. N.Z. price \$45.00.

RAEWYN DALZIEL has written a continuously readable, artfully shaped and intellectually satisfying biography of Sir Julius Vogel and Auckland/Oxford University Press have turned it into a handsome, well-illustrated book. Both author and publisher are to be congratulated. But Dalziel's achievement transcends this sort of pat on the back and raises questions about political biography and historical narrative in New Zealand which merit contemplation. Insofar as it survives at all, political history in this country survives almost exclusively in biography. The reasons for this may not be entirely academic, as the flight of fading politicians (or those out of favour with the academic establishment) to the memoir writing desk may indicate. There are here, however, intellectual issues worth considering even by those fliers by instinct, the bumble-bee school of biography.

The most casual admirer of this book cannot fail to recognize that it is the artful accomplishment of a skilled and mature historian, in full command of her material and with a distinctive view of how this life was critically shaped by the contexts of New Zealand politics. It is, in my modest opinion, the finest political biography to have been produced in this country. Thematically, it transcends the naive moralisms of how a failed adventurer could become a key figure in New Zealand history or the tension between dubious speculations and statesmanship. Instead, it lays the groundwork for a much more sophisticated treatment of personal and public life in a migrant community and culture. In other words, it sets the limits of what can be achieved in political biography in New Zealand and those limits are worth pondering.

Like other New Zealand historians, Dalziel shows no taste for direct analysis. In a sort of epilogue at the very end of the book — the standard location for biographical autopsy — she contrasts two assessments of Vogel: the favourable, Whig, state-builder appraisal of William Pember Reeves and the disapprobation of Alfred Saunders's Tory contempt for urban monied interests and the taint of political corruption. Dalziel herself slips away. Vogel 'undoubtedly a political adventurer, contributed more to the development of New Zealand and possessed a greater vision of its place in the Pacific, and in the world, than any other politician of his time'. Perhaps, and with some justification, she felt that the indirect analysis, which permeates the text and informs its selections, had already done the work she intended it to do. Certainly there would have been risks in being too conclusive about the themes of the book since they continue to be themes of New Zealand life as well as history.

Vogel's story is that of the epic and classical struggle, as he put it, to 'command circumstances'. In a sense, all migration and migrant culture is an attempt to 'command circumstances' by altering or redefining them spatially, environmentally, socially and individually. Vogel, schooled in the classics, would have been aware of the classical, if not the Renaissance debate on the relationship between *fortuna* and *virtu*. Did one rely on fate, or, by exercise of will and intellect, seek to shape and command one's own destiny? Vogel's Jewish background may have further freed him from the passivities of a Christian providentialism. (One wonders what he thought, for example, of Otago's observance in February 1868 of a day of public humiliation and prayer as a means of obtaining decent harvest weather). In Dalziel's version, his was a struggle 'for power and fame' 'against the odds of crippling ill health, financial insecurity, and colonial obscurity'. In order 'to

influence people and events', he had to enter politics. There, like others before him, he found the city-state at 'the mercy of international trends and forces' which, if the republic were to survive in *virtu*, had to be held at bay. He 'refused to accept Atkinson's belief that the country must be governed by overseas prices for wool and wheat'. Will, energy, intelligence, that is *virtu*, the 'enterprise and resource of the colonists' would lead to 'other outlets for the working power of the colony and other means of bringing it to a happy and prosperous condition'. That search, both for markets and for civic *virtu*, goes on.

One of the fascinating aspects of this biography, then, is the intertwining of Vogel's personal struggle to command circumstance with New Zealand's recurrent and sometimes desperate need to do the same. In personal terms, it is a startling and yet ultimately tragic story. Virtually orphaned, at the age of sixteen Vogel was one of the first students at the Government School of Mines in London when its doors opened in 1851. What a moment that must have been! Science was conveying the command of nature and thereby of circumstance into the young man's hands. At seventeen, he left for the goldfields of Victoria to set up in business as an assayer. Fortune could not but be kind. To his sister in London he wrote that he was pleased 'to cast myself upon the wide world with money insufficient to support me for a year with nothing but chance to depend on for a future subsistence'. No wonder that he acquired a taste for gambling in all its forms on the goldfields, but he also learned, through business and journalism, that command of circumstance was better than reliance on blind luck.

Leaving Victoria for Otago in 1861, he soon showed that energy, will, intelligence and persistence which were necessary if fortune were to be made rather than endured. Within a month of arrival, he had founded the colony's first daily newspaper and he kept it going despite adversity. Two years after arrival, he was a Provincial Councillor and member of the House of Representatives. By 1869 he was Colonial Treasurer; four years later, Premier of a country which, partly as a result of his own policies, enjoyed high export prices, a buoyant land market and a heavy demand for labour, with roads and railways under construction in most provinces. Is this not the New Zealand dream?

In 1874 Sir James Fergusson wrote back to London of him: 'It is a wonderful thing for a Jew editor of a country newspaper in a few years to become the undisputed leader of the "Gentleman's Colony", but so it is and nowhere is he more popular than in Canterbury'. Vogel himself had written to his sister in 1866 of 'the conviction that a great fortune is in store for me'. That 'fortune' was won by energy, will and above all the willingness to gamble by borrowing overseas for development and immigration as in the great scheme of 1870. What Vogel later admired in Disraeli was his 'intellect and indomitable will', and his own 'strong will' intimidated his political rivals and swept him into office. But if *virtu* had given him command of political fortune his personal fortunes were never secure and, by 1875, Dalziel sees him at the point of crisis. Just over forty, it appeared that his career had peaked. He was made anxious by financial difficulties, the need to provide for his family and he was increasingly sick.

At that moment, fortune smiled her crooked smile. Vogel enjoyed what Dalziel calls 'an extraordinary piece of luck'. Vogel himself should have known better; command of circumstance is sure; the favour of fortune is treacherous. The Agent-General died in London and Vogel took the job, hoping to use its connections to establish himself politically and financially in England. But, as Dalziel points out, 'By leaving New Zealand he lost control over the system'. Unable to command

circumstances, he became a prey to them. His schemes floundering, he gambled on his political and social credit and lost. By 1884 he was returning to New Zealand, financially desperate and crippled by illness. To rescue his investments he had to re-enter politics. Command of circumstance was command of politics. But this time, though winning the trappings of office, he failed in his larger purposes. Why?

In 1885-6 his will to triumph over national economic constraints was not shared by his ministerial colleagues. 1886, in particular, was a bad year with Vogel dogged by sickness, debt, and financial scandal. The perversity of events also depressed him. He recognized, for example, that the achievement of national economic growth led to a sense of national independence which cut against his hopes for imperial federation. Vogel was not only losing control of circumstances. Once in opposition, he was inclined to lose control of himself. Later still, his claim, that the expansionist policies of the early seventies were in part designed to prevent racial conflict, was ridiculed in New Zealand. He was losing control of his own historical reputation.

In September 1886, depressed and defeated, he received comfort and support from his sister, Frances. 'But you must not lose hope. How often it happens that after a series of misfortunes, a change takes place: all that we deserve happens to us, as it were, we are in luck again; so it will be with you, be assured that the future has yet some good in store for you'. For all its loving consolation, this is the voice of defeat. Circumstances are no longer commanded. They are to command and Vogel is to be their hapless victim. Did he, in a retirement of disappointed hopes and progressively straitened circumstances, remember his youthful scrapbook entry? 'The great merit of philosophy when we cannot command circumstances is to reconcile us to them'.

If fortune were indeed a wheel, its passage through time cyclical, much would be explained about the recurrences echoing between these pages and what we see about us now. Preoccupations with and anxieties about borrowing overseas for development; the realisation that 'manufacturing and production had not increased sufficiently to justify the inflated land prices'; the search for new markets and products which would free the country from dependence on the vagaries of primary commodity markets; the faith in the saving grace of new technology and the pursuit of speculative schemes associated with it; the development of closer and preferential trading ties, the trans-Tasman *Zollverein*, with Australia; all of these, so familiar to us, may almost be said to have been invented by Julius Vogel. Similarly, Vogel's ambivalences about aspirations and realities in the Pacific, or in relation to the Great Powers and independence, recall our own. Did he invent, for New Zealand, the political leadership style of the 'rough diamond', a style to be elaborated by others: largely a solo effort, without meetings and consultations, based on the belief that 'bargaining, not organization, was the basis of political cohesion'?

Insofar as these recurrences or continuities signify anything, they mean that the *événementielle* of the individual life must be set against the *conjunction* and *structure* of the social historian. In Julian Barnes's novel of the biographer's art and obsession, *Flaubert's Parrot*, the two central themes are the range of patterns to which the incidents of a single life can lend themselves and the limitations on that range of patterns. Those limits are the point at which individual history and social history intersect and modern biography is nothing if not the plotting and examination of those intersections. Raewyn Dalziel's is a triumphant achievement, extending political biography in New Zealand to the limit of its

present capacities. Before it can supersede them, we shall need a mature social history and, in particular, an historical political sociology.

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*The Perano Whalers of Cook Strait, 1911-1964.* By Don Grady. Reed, Wellington, 1982. 238 pp. Out of print.

*Colonial Surgeon.* By Gail Lambert. Dunmore, Palmerston North, 1981. 213 pp. N.Z. price: \$19.95.

*Tauranga 1882-1982: The Centennial of Gazetting Tauranga as a Borough.* Edited by A. C. Bellamy. Tauranga City Council, Tauranga, 1982. 296 pp. N.Z. price \$12.50.

*Totara Estate: Centenary of the Frozen Meat Industry.* By Martine E. Cuff. New Zealand Historic Places Trust, Wellington, 1982. 80 pp. N.Z. price: \$10.00.

*Maoris and Settlers in South Otago: A History of Port Molyneux and its Surrounds.* By Fred Waite. Otago Heritage Books, Dunedin, 1980. 81 pp. N.Z. price: \$6.95.

*Gold, Quartz and Cyanide: The Story of Barewood Reef.* By John Ingram. Otago Heritage Books, Dunedin, 1980. 48 pp. N.Z. price: \$6.50.

*A Cornish Miner at Hamiltons.* By Audrey Paterson. Otago Heritage Books, Dunedin, 1980. 32 pp. N.Z. price: \$5.50.

*Taiari Mouth and its Surrounding Districts.* By Win Parkes and Kath Hislop. Otago Heritage Books, Dunedin, 1980. 72 pp. N.Z. price: \$11.50.

LOCAL HISTORY is alive and well in New Zealand, and the market seems to be expanding. From the perspective of a professional the main irritant can be simply stated: with the exception of the books by Lambert and Cuff it is often impossible to know how the author knows, for no sources are cited. Yet with the exception of the Centennial history of Tauranga, a collage rather than a history, these works are all written with skill and sensitivity. Although they do not necessarily try to address the themes of New Zealand's history, they provide interesting insights. In each case they probe a local perspective, and this is their strength. It might be argued indeed that, for most of the nineteenth century, local perspectives are more revealing than views from the capital and, even in this century (as Don Grady's fascinating book makes clear), important. Some might argue that the true reality of New Zealand's history can only be captured through intensive study of localities. Others have retorted that as a people we have moved so often and so far that the very idea of a local community is misleading. Yet as these books make clear there were local communities, whether villages, towns, districts, or sheep stations; there were institutional continuities; and there were individuals and families who stayed put. A satisfying history of these small islands (so to speak) must, eventually, contain and resolve the variety of local experiences and family experiences.

In another sense these books cover much of New Zealand's nineteenth century history, although Grady's loving account of *The Perano Whalers*, an industry which is usually discussed in the context of the years before 1840, begins effectively in 1911.