

A Destiny at Home

AT A TIME when most aspiring academics in this country assumed, for the most part correctly, that overseas degrees were the high road to success, Keith Sinclair, whether by accident, design or necessity, took his doctorate from the University of New Zealand. Though both his M.A. and Ph.D. theses were substantially researched in London, there remains something satisfying about this way of making a start. The credentials as well as the bearer are native born.

Significantly, both for the times and for the lasting concerns of the writer, this starting point was a way of entering New Zealand history through the imperial/colonial gateway. Then it was, if not the only path, certainly the best trodden. Beaglehole, Condliffe, Morrell, Wood, Ross and Sutch had followed it. A century earlier historical writing had been the by-product of polemics about imperial policy. To the very modest extent to which it was in the syllabus at all, New Zealand history in the university was a bit of imperial history.

Some of the changes since Sinclair's mid-1940s start relate to the different entry points which other historians have found. New Zealand history has been for many a second choice, a second string, or even a second best, enforced by the exigencies of teaching and research. Whatever the reason for getting started, this development has had a broadening effect. By the 1980s, people who combine New Zealand history with that of some other country have a prominent place. New Zealand history, seen from the vantage point of, say, American, Australian, British, African or Pacific history, takes on a different complexion. The country becomes something of a case study in a wider field of modern history. The modern world, not the Empire/Commonwealth, becomes the context — appropriately enough at a time when the Commonwealth is ceasing to matter much in fact.

Sinclair's point of entry was entirely congruent with the character of the country in which he grew up — New Zealand between the wars and in the Second World War. It is not that this period lacks assertions of a distinct local identity. But the assertions have always a post- or non- or anti-British character, which alter but do not diminish the cogency of the word 'British'. This imperial starting-point has remained a formative influence throughout Sinclair's writing. When one says 'Not British' one is still

paying a tribute, even if an ambiguous one, to Britishness.

That much-misunderstood manifesto, *A Destiny Apart* (mistaken by some puzzled reviewers for a monograph), made explicit what had always been an understated informing principle — nativism, defined against whatever seemed likely to deny or destroy it. Sinclair's continuing impulse is to celebrate whatever is unlike what has been brought across the seas, as a source of communal identity in a society where transplanted identities weaken and threaten with their divisiveness.

So, Reeves is 'the first great European *New Zealander*'; the native-born Kirk, not the immigrant Fraser, is the author of the country's first nationalistic foreign policy. Certainly the prophet paints the historian into some awkward corners. Harry Holland, not at all an imperialist, was an immigrant; Sidney Holland, the last man to use the word 'Empire', was a native son. And so on. None of this is beside the point, but nor is it quite the point.

The point is that this impulse to explore the distinctive and to celebrate the emergent was the spark that fired a major historical intellect in a man with a formidable capacity for research. The impulse provides a thread of continuity in a fairly diverse series of studies. Recurrently, the need to say 'Not British' links the nativist principle with the imperialist point of departure.

Over the last 40 years Sinclair has moved purposefully through the major divisions of New Zealand history since settlement. The 1950s was mainly taken up with race relations and conflict in the 1850s and 1860s; the 1960s with settler politics and business in the later nineteenth century; the 1970s with the Labour Party, especially in the second quarter of the twentieth century; and the 1980s with questions of nationality, especially in the half-century from the 1880s to the 1930s. There are anticipations, exceptions and backward glances, but the overall pattern is reasonably clear and remarkably progressive. Throughout, the context of New Zealand history has been that of the Empire/Commonwealth and of Australasia. It could be objected that the topics required that context; true, but they were the ones the historian chose.

The specialist studies quickly established Sinclair's right to be heard; but, of course, he has exercised the right well beyond the confines of an academic audience. His works of popularization have probably had a greater influence upon the public mind than the writings of any other historian in New Zealand, just as in his specialized writings he has done more to draw up the agenda of research. No other historian, no other *writer*, has had that kind of impact.

The general works, especially the Penguin *History*, are remarkable attempts to project a personal vision of the country, to see New Zealand whole, in a manner much more that of the rhetorician than that of the theorist. In a narrow sense the Penguin is now, in spite of revisions, 'out of date'. But the vision is not impaired by that. Readers requiring a supply of more or less reliable information can go to the *Oxford History*; but they will

still need to read the Penguin (and Reeves's *The Long White Cloud*). The Penguin is still briskly selling after nearly 30 years. Publishers should pause and reflect before they congratulate themselves too heartily on the novel that sells a few thousands in a few years and fades away until rescued by the Auckland University Press Classics series. Good general histories are stayers and money-spinners. *The Long White Cloud* is still in print — but who, these days, buys and reads William Satchell? The Penguin *History* is likely to be bought and read for at least as long. Who would predict that of . . . ? Supply the title of the contemporary novel of your choice.

In both specialized and general works, Sinclair's characteristic virtue is his argumentativeness. He constantly talks his way along the tracks provided by the evidence towards a conclusion specific to the precise matter in hand. Across the Tasman, by contrast, Manning Clark asserts more than he argues, and the 'conclusion' relates to a personal vision of Australian history as a whole, not to some specific context within it. Sinclair's arguments stay close to the evidence, and they prosper in competition with other arguments which also have some claim upon the evidence. He is out to show that Maori resistance did *not* arise out of government neglect; that there was *no* Maori Land League; that New Zealanders were *not* imperialistic. It is a liberation as well as a limitation that his arguments are not designed to bear out some up-front vision or general theory but a conclusion about a discrete segment of the whole story. What I have called 'nativism' is less a theory than a recurrent attitude.

In this Sinclair is like most New Zealand historians for whom fidelity to context and respect for evidence count for more than visionary moments and theoretical frameworks. Confronted by visionaries and theoreticians (commonly social scientists, novelists and journalists) historians here have typically responded by neither evaluating the theory nor advancing a counter theory, but by showing where the theory does not 'fit the facts'. Sinclair's review of David Bedggood's *Rich and Poor in New Zealand* is a good example. Even in their best-mannered moments, historians and sociologists seldom get beyond a wary exchange of courtesies and assurances that they would have a good deal to offer each other if only they could discover what it was.

J. H. Hexter once described historians as writers who used footnotes and told a story. People leave traces of what they did and said; historians collect the traces and arrange them into a story. At least that; they may well go on to do other things. Though the traces are never complete and though the story is never a re-run, no historian feels at ease if the evidence is not as complete as effort can make it and if the story lacks a feel of conviction.

Sinclair is well served by Hexter's description. This, he says, is what happened at Waitara, as nearly as can be told; this is how the Scarecrow Ministry came about; this is what preceded and followed the death of Ballance; this is how it happened that Lee was expelled. The imagination, Allen Curnow once said about poetry, is a captive balloon; Sinclair has a profound respect for the mooring ropes that tie the historian to the

evidence. The effort to discover the past is not to be inhibited by the knowledge that it is not in itself recoverable, for the historian does not attempt to rebuild it but to tell a story about it. The footnotes tell why that story and not another has been told.

If telling stories is so basic, it is not at all belittling to say that Sinclair is essentially a narrative historian. Indeed, few fiction writers have his narrative skill. If literary critics could be persuaded to dismantle the artificial barrier they have erected between 'creative' and 'non-creative' writing, he would rank as a leading exponent of the social realism that characterizes most New Zealand prose literature.

He is not, of course, a mere story-teller. His framework is narrative and not analytical; however, analysis is an essential part of the narrative flow. This kind of history arises most readily from research in the archives, for each archival item preserves the story-line of the person who created it. Sinclair is indeed most at home among the people who created the archives — officials, soldiers, missionaries, politicians, bankers, organizers and agitators. He has chosen not to deal in social aggregates but to allow eminent men to typify the populations they appear to represent. Aggregates which lack notables, and so are largely silent in the archival record, do not get much attention — women, Maori (after the wars of the 1860s), farmers, artisans, shopkeepers and the labouring poor. Where the archives are silent, where different traces have to be used to make a different kind of story, there is plenty of room for Sinclair's numerate, systematic successors.

He has been heard to regret that he went to university before it was possible to study sociology — though one may suspect that he would have lost as well as gained if he had. He does not seem to be much at home with statistics nor with the massive sorts of documentation that call for some kind of content analysis. And as such kinds of history usually assemble evidence to test some broad-spectrum theory, that is not surprising. But he has been generous in his welcome to other kinds of history, especially as editor of the *Journal*. Many will recall his enthusiastic reception of Miles Fairburn's paper, 'The Rural Myth and the New Urban Frontier' at an early Historical Association conference. I rather doubt if he agreed with much of it; still, he intervened in a debate which was taking up one point of detail after another, and reminded the rather captious critics (including the present writer) that they had just listened to the only fresh interpretation of New Zealand history he had ever heard.

The reception of Fairburn's influential paper helps to locate the soft underbelly of New Zealand history writing. It was attacked on points of detail; it was applauded because it was original. No-one argued that the thesis should be accepted or rejected because it was right or wrong. New Zealand history is a cosy club in which the only real crime is to be a poor technician. How often do Sir Keith and I meet outsiders' assumptions that we must, or should, be deadly enemies and not good drinking cobbles. Perhaps we would each be the better if we were enemies, but it is hard to see

how we could be. But even without such an animus, some have discovered, comparing the Penguin and the Faber short histories, that he is a radical and I a conservative. So, perhaps, it would be proper for me, while neither admitting nor rejecting the charge and not feeling especially responsible for what I wrote a quarter of a century ago, to take a mild and friendly look at Sinclair the historian as a man of the left.

Pretty obviously, he is a man of the left. A shudder ran through the ranks of liberal academia, in places as remote as Palmerston North and Dunedin, when it was rumoured that he had accepted a commission to write the life of Robert Muldoon, after, of all things, dining with the man. But though 'left' is an apt enough attribution, his seems to be a broad centre-left position, and his sympathies to be broader even than that. As his *Listener* article on Muldoon showed, he puts a high value on such qualities as vigour, improvisation, scant regard for tradition, sturdy enterprise and self-reliance. These qualities seem to count for more than prescribed political and ideological positions. A bright working-class youth, growing up through depression, recovery and war, he could hardly avoid taking on some of the colour of the left. The qualities he appears to value most are a good deal closer to the native soil; the impulse towards the indigenous goes a good deal deeper. To criticize as I did once his *Reeves* for some ill-fitting Marxist phraseology is to mistake the clothes for the emperor. Reeves attracted Sinclair because he was an energetic, home-grown intellectual active in politics, history and poetry. All biography is, in some measure, an exercise in autobiography.

There is another aspect of this diffuse liberal-leftism which needs teasing out, one not so close to the surface as the alignment with the political left. Idealism is perhaps the best word for it; Sinclair, while on the side of the left, is more emphatically on the side of the good, especially when they are the sufferers and the losers, and of their champions. The writing of history, while retaining its firm grounding in the evidence, becomes as well an act of retrospective justice. There is a germ of truth in the charge that the New Zealand left is constantly winning in books the battles it lost long ago in reality. It is still a matter of setting the record straight, specifically by giving the sufferers a place of honour within it — the Maori who defied imperialism and the humanitarians who defended them, the radicals who tried to entrench the aspirations of ordinary people, and the policy makers who tried to achieve some kind of international security for this and for other small nations.

In the end, the writing of history itself becomes an idealistic activity. Its purpose is not just to correct the record, nor just to celebrate the sufferers and their champions — it is also to join the ranks of the champions. The Penguin *History* has its lasting place because it is, as well as a swift-moving narrative, a celebration of those who were trying to create a second chance in the South Pacific. Sinclair, like his heroes, speaks for the aspirers. Writing history, too, is an autobiographical activity.

Though Sinclair's most notable poem is in prose and is called a history,

This elegaic note, indeed, is often struck in Sinclair's prose as well as in his verse. Maori lose; Reeves fails; Nash dwindles; Kirk dies. There is a deal more promise than fulfilment. The emergence of Pacific man in the *History* and the self-definition of nationality in *A Destiny Apart* are no more than hopeful beginnings. The distinctiveness to be uncovered by the historian is a promise, a prelude; fulfilment lies in the future and its celebration is the work of the prophet.

This kind of exposition is a hazardous enterprise — but, it is to be hoped, more worth the effort than an essay praising Sinclair for being a good technician whose footnotes can usually be relied upon. He himself so determinedly underplays theory. Once an article appeared contrasting two general approaches to New Zealand history. His was said to be Turnerian, mine Hartzian. Though I found the label fairly acceptable, it was the case that I had never heard of Lewis Hartz until I had to teach American history late in the 1960s. He could hardly say that of his acquaintance with Frederick Jackson Turner. Still, he made it very clear that nothing had been further from his mind than the frontier thesis when he wrote his short history.

As a result, I am fully prepared to be told, with characteristic energy, that none of this is of any account, that he has simply been trying to tell the truth as he saw it. Who could disagree with that? I am trying to guess, no more, at some of the less obvious dimensions of that truth. It is a complex truth we are greatly enriched by.

W. H. OLIVER

Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Wellington