

Reviews

From the Cradle to the Grave: A Biography of Michael Joseph Savage. By Barry Gustafson. Reed Methuen, Auckland, 1986. 369 pp. N.Z. price: \$38.50.

A FEW DAYS after I had unsuccessfully contested the North Shore electorate for Labour in the 1966 election, an elderly Devonport widow rang me. She wanted her framed picture of Michael Joseph Savage to go to a 'good home'. I called at a small house, Catholic, working class. Savage hung above the mantelpiece in the tidy, museum-like front room. He was removed reverently, dusted, and kissed. 'The nearest person to Christ in my life', I was told as she handed him to me, tears in her eyes.

For Seddon and Kirk, death while in office afforded the opportunity for a national outpouring of emotion and affection. With Savage the worshippers had gathered long before. The dimpled face, the glasses, the avuncular air, all conveyed rectitude and confidence after a generation of uncertainty. He personified hope, and, as he battled cancer over his final eighteen months, courage as well. By the time he reached office in 1935 Savage perfectly represented the inchoate ideology and emerging national identity that were so much a part of the early years of the first Labour government. As Keith Sinclair commented a generation later, Savage smelled more of the church bazaar than of the barricades. That was the secret of his success, and of the Labour government's longevity.

From the Cradle to the Grave is a careful attempt to trace the development of twentieth-century New Zealand's most important political persona. To many it must seem strange that someone so loved has been so little written about. The usual explanation — no papers — usually means that no one has made more than desultory inquiries. Gustafson, by diligent research, has uncovered an amazing quantity of material.

Savage seems not to have kept diaries. But little caches of his letters have been discovered, most notably those he sent to his nieces in Australia. These provide welcome insights into family background, as well as his personal likes and dislikes. No one can fail to be moved by the story of Savage's first few years. The drudgery on the small dirt farm east of Benalla in Victoria — the rains, the droughts, the fires, the locusts. Then there is the melodrama surrounding the early loss of his mother. But Gustafson's information runs dry from time to time. Between 1890 and Savage's decision (not fully explained) to emigrate to New Zealand in 1907, the story lacks detail. Savage seems to have been part of Australia's wandering working class. He cleared bush, survived insect hordes, slaughtered rabbits, and eventually settled in Rutherglen's mining community.

Gustafson's enthusiasm for painting the background is in stark contrast to specifics about Savage himself. Savage's contacts with the Australian Workers'

Union, with the shearers' strike of 1895, and his association with Arthur Rae and J.C. Watson are not even the subject of much speculation. Gustafson's caution in this regard makes some parts of the story heavy going. The subject simply fades behind the background information.

With Savage's arrival in New Zealand, available personal material comes to the biographer's rescue. Savage was soon in Auckland where he lived and worked for the rest of his life. A picture emerges of a talented organizer, possessed of drive, direction, and enthusiasm. He provided the political, union, and social contacts for the many single men like himself who congregated in the inner city. Politics was a substitute for family; indeed it is clear that no one with close personal commitments could possibly have taken on Savage's many responsibilities — a point that Gustafson does not stress.

By the end of 1919 Savage was a member of the Auckland City Council and of the Hospital Board, besides being an MP and national secretary of the Labour Party. In a party of individualists, led by the socialist ideologue Holland, Savage was the person whose common sense and never-ending slog for the party held it together. Almost alone in those early days the small dirt-farmer's son had a vision of a broadly-based party; such was essential if Labour was to win power in a country whose electoral system was slanted away from the towns. As the depression closed in it was Savage, more than anyone, who built the monetary reform bridge that brought so many erstwhile sceptics to Labour's promised land.

It is a convincing story that explains why the person who has so often been derided got where he did. And yet Gustafson overdoes it. His critical faculties cannot always come to grips with the popular myths that surrounded Savage in his lifetime. One such is that Savage was uniquely in touch with his electorate supporters. But an MP who devoted eleven days a month to speaking around the country (p.125) in an era before planes, and who fulfilled his required obligations to Parliament, could not possibly have returned to Auckland every weekend (p.127), let alone have regularly canvassed door to door in his electorate, as Gustafson claims.

There are a few strange factual lapses as well. The election of Rex Mason in 1926 'made little difference to the situation in Parliament', we are told on p.127. Nonsense. The event finally removed any doubts that Labour, for the first time, would become the official opposition. Nor do some of the sentences outlining the options before Labour following the 1928 election (p.135) make sense. And Forbes had not replaced Ward as Prime Minister by 8 May 1930 (p.137). New Zealand did not obtain a 'free general doctor service' in 1941 (p.243) — and so on.

These, however, are minor matters. Behind the disarmingly benign, friendly, political saviour of many, Gustafson points to a tough, shrewd politician, personally rigorous in his private life, but tolerant of others' misdemeanours. Gustafson gives us the most credible account to date, too, of Cabinet strategy in the 1936-40 period, especially in the lead-up to the 1940 Labour Party conference.

One issue remains a mystery, however. The explanation as to why Savage put off surgery on the eve of the 1938 election is obvious: even his desire to be at the 1939 party conference was understandable. But six months intervened between these events. And following the 1939 conference the ailing Prime Minister took on more, not fewer, duties. Was the failure to take doctors' advice because Savage saw himself as indispensable? Did he doubt the seriousness of his illness, or did he wonder whether — as an increasing number of New Zealanders seemed to feel — that he was immortal? Or was it a single-minded passion for work that had been the hallmark of his 30 years in New Zealand politics that propelled the withering body forward?

When Gustafson does take a stab at explaining these issues on p.256 he gets them rather mixed. The question is not why Savage failed to surrender the prime-ministership immediately he learned of the necessity for surgery, but why he delayed it so long that death had become almost inevitable.

Some mysteries about Savage's life seem likely to remain, Gustafson's extraordinary industry notwithstanding. There are still gaps in the picture. But what was previously a large, almost blank canvas has benefited greatly from Gustafson's diligent brush.

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Frederick Weld. By Jeanine Graham. Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1983. 225 pp. N.Z. price: \$29.95.

THE CHARM which graced Jeanine Graham's chapter in the *Oxford History of New Zealand* is even more evident in her delightful study of one of New Zealand's earliest premiers. Most doctoral theses do not convert into readable books but Graham has made this difficult transition with ease. Many years of research have been condensed into a compact volume without losing the flavour of the man or the times in which he lived.

Unlike so many modern authors Graham refrains from making ahistorical judgements. Instead she evaluates Weld's views and actions according to the standards of his time and shows that he was consistent in terms of his own beliefs. On the other hand she is critical of his failings and discusses criticisms made by contemporaries with considerable fairness. Her judicious treatment of a man who could be all too readily dismissed as an imperialist, racist, or oligarch represents a considerable achievement.

Frederick Aloysius Weld was born into a Catholic family on 9 May 1823. His Dorset ancestry was impeccable on both sides of the family and even as severe a critic of Stevan Eldred-Grigg and his aristocratic conspiracy thesis as myself is forced to concede that Weld came from the middle ranks of the English gentry. The inevitable consequence of this was Weld's refusal to put down roots in New Zealand. He always thought of himself as an Englishman and never regarded his time in New Zealand as anything other than a temporary experience. He was, therefore, a colonist rather than a colonial. After studying at the Jesuit University of Fribourg in Switzerland (Catholics were not admitted to Oxbridge until much later), he came to New Zealand in 1844 to join his cousins, the Cliffords and Vavasours, who were pioneering pastoralists in both Marlborough and the Wairarapa.

The gentility of the 20-year-old proved little hindrance, for Weld helped to introduce sheep into the Wairarapa. He roughed it in extremely harsh conditions for a year while the Wharekaka station was established. During this time Weld had a lot to do with the local Maori and decided that 'firmness' was the best method of dealing with the 'natives'. Weld himself was no farmer but he soon learnt all that was required of a squatter from his Scottish shepherd, Tom Caverhill, and entered into a successful partnership with Clifford. They established two more stations, Flaxbourne in Marlborough and Stonyhurst in Canterbury. Weld based himself at Flaxbourne, built himself a homestead after which Lake Flaxmere is named, found new