

Review Article

Miles Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and its Enemies; the Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society 1850 – 1900*. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1989. 316 pp. NZ price: \$32.95.

THIS IS one of the most important historical works written in New Zealand this century. Even if one does not accept fully Fairburn's major contentions, the boldness of his conception, the range and depth of his challenge to the established interpretations of New Zealand history, the fluency of his writing, and the thoroughness of the scholarship in which his interpretation is grounded will oblige his readers to take renewed stock of their historical self-perceptions.

Fairburn explains in his Introduction that the book is a social history of a particular kind. It draws upon a great variety of data but eschews familiar categories of interpretation — race, gender, class — that have dominated academic discourse in recent decades. 'The governing category employed in this book', he writes, 'is the colony's social organisation — the fabric of interpersonal relationships, the sorts of ties people formed, the settings and institutions which bonded them together and through which they interacted' (p.11). He might well have said the *absence* of these things, for he goes on to argue that what characterized the New Zealand of 1850-1900 was its 'bondlessness', its 'atomisation', its 'extreme individualism'.

Those familiar with Fairburn's earlier writings will know that he has long argued that nineteenth-century New Zealand society was characterized by high mobility, both geographic and social. People moved about so much, and occupied such a variety of stations in life, some of them simultaneously, that stratification by social class or hierarchy could not emerge. Now he has greatly enlarged this thesis on two main fronts.

First, he challenges the classic left-wing, or left-liberal, interpretations of New Zealand history, characterized by the work of W.B. Sutch in the 1960s and by Professor Erik Olssen more recently. In a succinct and penetrating chapter Fairburn analyses the main ways in which the concept of class-division is used. He does not dispute that a number of the great estate owners, and some of the urban merchants and professionals who had links with them, did form a class in terms of a subculture or community interacting among themselves and acting to extend their control of economic resources. What he does dispute is that 'the majority of the 60 to 70 per cent of the population who can broadly be called manual workers' comprised such a class. Notwithstanding the embryonic trade unions, the political labour organizations of the 1890s and the rhetoric of class struggle, Fairburn argues that the actual social mobility of most New Zealanders, and their tenacious pursuit of the goal of individual self-improvement and upward mobility, prevented, except in small and untypical instances, the emergence of the kind

of working-class coherence that Olssen claims to have identified. Fairburn uses quantification and statistical analysis much more systematically than do most New Zealand historians, and thereby poses a serious and solid challenge to those whose evidence is, in his terms, impressionistic. Thus, notwithstanding some slowing in land availability in relation to immigration and birth-rate, he can show that social mobility, including access to land, was still the norm well into the twentieth century, and political parties were concerned with providing it. Olssen himself has, after all, shown how political Labour had to abandon its land nationalization plank before it could credibly present itself as an alternative government in the 1920s. Moreover, Fairburn has related his findings to many of the most important studies of other comparable societies, and is able to show, for example, that the class formation among New Zealand miners or Red Feds and the industrial strife that resulted was very small-scale stuff in comparison with what went on in the United Kingdom, USA, and Australia.

However, Fairburn advances an even more far-reaching argument. He shows, from contemporary published and private writings, that colonization of New Zealand was couched in an ethos of arcadianism — the belief in a land of natural abundance — where immigrants (provided they worked hard) could pursue their individual self-fulfilment, without the barriers of entrenched social hierarchy or class division, in reasonable comfort 'without fear of collective disharmony or status anxiety'. Fairburn then examines what were considered both by the participants themselves, and by historians since, to be the threats to this ideal society — the familiar old-world threats of social hierarchy and domination — and finds that these threats were not real. From the same evidence with which he demolishes such threats, Fairburn nevertheless argues that the ideal society was doomed, for quite other reasons — an unacceptable level of loneliness, individual licence, violent behaviour, and lack of community sense. Excessive individualism was 'a source of misery not felicity', he writes in his characteristically succinct style. Fairburn's conclusion attains the philosophical: 'There is no good life to look forward to, no possibility of heaven on earth. For every desirable social feature, there is always an unintended bad consequence.' Arcadian individualism brought with it its own inherent bad consequences. New Zealand's colonial experience shows that 'the real enemy of the Arcadian ideal society is Arcadia itself.'

Provocative stuff indeed to the inhabitants of God's own country! Many will feel that he has been too sweeping — that if 'heaven on earth' is impossible, the 'good life' is nevertheless attainable — that it has indeed been attained by many New Zealanders much of the time. To the extent that this is so, Fairburn would argue (and here he is closer to the socialist thinkers) that is because Utopianism — deliberate social engineering — has moderated the ill-effects of laissez-faire Arcadianism. Moreover, he suggests that the atomized society 'as a living entity' had 'vanished' by the 1920s, having been supplanted by the much more tightly ordered, indeed regimented, society with which most of us have grown up, and which has conditioned the interpretations of most New Zealand historians.

I am dubious about this alleged cleavage between areas. To grow up in rural New Zealand in the 1940s was, in fact, still to experience the astonishing persistence of the arcadian ethos of small-farmer society: the confident hope — indeed socially-imposed onus — that by individual industry, frugality, and probity one would 'get on'. It was to know still the ugly side — that while drunkenness had greatly declined, covert violence was still widespread; that, although community had greatly increased (as a result of the war ethos and war organization, the support of the wider family, and such wonderful figures as the District Nurse), loneliness, especially for rural women, was still a real and awful prospect. Until New Zealand history comes to be written by the children, probably the daughters, of the rural poor, few will realize the health-and-sanity-destroying dread of the mortgage foreclosure, the diphtheria epidemic, TB in the herd, injury to the able-

bodied, from which nightmare fears only the Labour welfare revolution plus the buoyant markets of the 1950s brought substantial relief. Cultural transformations do not usually happen as fast or as totally as Fairburn would have us believe and there was much more arcadianism, both in its positive and negative aspects, after the 1920s, and probably much more interrelatedness and community before them, than his broad-brush picture suggests.

But qualifications and nuances of timing aside, Fairburn has rendered service of inestimable value in presenting to us, through his careful study of New Zealand attitudes and practices relating to property-owning, his challenge to the classic 'left' frameworks of class-analysis and historical analysis and his new categories of analysis. He can, in a sense, be considered part of the world current which is flowing against the familiar class-based categories of analysis — a movement which encompasses such vast changes as the shift to de-regulated economies by Labour governments everywhere and the collapse of command economies in eastern Europe. By that very token it is timely that Fairburn has warned of the real dangers to which arcadian individualism can lead, and has shown that while co-operation and community cannot be centrally compelled, they can be even more thoroughly destroyed by over-confident individualism in an apparently limitless field of opportunity. Are there parallels between the psychoses and violence and drug epidemic of our time and the comparable consequences of isolation and alienation in 1850-1900?

There can be little doubt that Fairburn has set the terms of debate for some time to come. His terms, his statistics, his chronology will be challenged by specialists in the field. But the categories he has used will no doubt illuminate comparable studies of the twentieth century — and perhaps produce surprises for Fairburn himself.

Great minds, from Benedetto Croce to Hans-Georg Gadamer, have urged that humanistic scholarship, setting aside both transcendental solutions and scientific or technological determinism, should find in an historicist regard for human experience and reflection upon that experience, the ultimate reality, the basis from which a people can assess its past and its choices for future self-development. The New Zealand people, as a thinking, political community in the wider sense, might well be grateful to Fairburn for providing fresh standpoints for self-awareness, evaluation, and choice. Fluently written and delightfully illustrated, the book deserves to reach a wider readership than that of the universities alone.

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