

Reviews

The People of Many Peaks. General Editor, Claudia Orange. Bridget Williams Books/ Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1991. 389 pp. NZ price: \$35.00.

THE PUBLICATION in 1990 of *Ngā Tāngata Taumata Rau*, the Maori language versions of the Maori biographies in Volume I of *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, was a rare event. Given the dearth of fluent speakers of Maori and of substantial publications in the language since the turn of the century, it had been a formidable undertaking — locating able writers and translators, restoring conventions for writing in Maori, and bringing a language young to the tradition of writing into the mode of a dictionary in print. The handsome result was a great credit to the editors; it also supported Maori aspirations for the survival of their language. The English *Dictionary*, however, might be held to be the more valuable publication if accessibility, a contemporary favourite, is the arbiter of value. But with the Maori biographies already in both languages, what was the purpose of this separate English edition of them, *The People of Many Peaks*?

The Introduction claims two purposes, although they were surely served by the earlier volumes: 'as a significant contribution in the field of Maori history; and as a companion volume to *Ngā Tāngata Taumata Rau*, for those who want to read the biographies in English as well as in Maori' (p.vii). Another, implicit but primary purpose, I suggest, lay in serving a strongly (although perhaps not widely) held aim to avoid national action which works to diminish Maori culture. In this case, they have attempted to achieve this by giving the Maori biographies an enhanced place.

If historians involved in the *Dictionary* project did have such an aim, it would have resulted in part from the public talk of a democratic community, talk which, if not necessarily easily, facilitates change. Open criticism by Maori of Pakeha publications about their history has over time amounted to two main contentions (applicable to either people I suppose): that Maori write their own history or that Pakeha write in collaboration with Maori and improve the chances of getting it right. Such critical talk has been sufficiently widespread and reasoned to engage (after the follies of vehemence and defensiveness had met) the productive response which I think this volume exemplifies. Maori and Pakeha worked together as editors, translators, writers and researchers to produce the three dictionaries. This was not remarkable for being without precedent (in the nineteenth century such collaborative work was more common), but rather for the contemporary success of a revival and improvement in that tradition.

A result of that work, *The People of Many Peaks* pays credit to the singularity of Maori life in New Zealand; it helps to balance the commonality of culture which the predominant Pakeha population compels. This fine-looking book speaks mainly to Maori (that it speaks in English is an honest, if unhappy, admission about the currency of Maori).

Moreover, it acknowledges their expressed desire for space from their other relations, the Pakeha, in being exclusive and in its price — \$35 as against paying \$79 for Pakeha in the *Dictionary*. It is therefore a document of social significance.

As a separate publication *The People of Many Peaks* is useful to readers because of its single focus. It facilitates readings beyond the particularity of individual lives, about tribal or genealogical history, for instance. It shows up aspects of content and selection which are common, even particular, to the Maori biographies. Conspicuous features of the content include the prevalence and depth of genealogical account, the recurrence of key topics, such as engagement in tribal wars and with Pakeha, and quotation of texts from the oral tradition. A paucity of information on cultural life is also noticeable, for instance when roles, such as tohunga, poet or orator, are ascribed in a header but not elaborated in the text. Given the ease of access to Pakeha documentary sources over Maori oral or manuscript sources, this is perhaps inevitable.

In a time of penchant (often excessive) for egalitarianism, it is not surprising that the editors of the *Dictionary* sought representativeness in their selection of subjects and writers. Again a separate volume makes it easier to assess the result for the Maori biographies, which I found to be less successful. This is no doubt because of a more limited choice of people and information, but it may also reflect the past and present force of genealogy and the oral tradition. Maori accounts of tribal history that I have read are sparing in the selection of ancestors named. Representativeness, which presumably includes the ordinary, is not a concern. In the oral tradition regard for hierarchy and extraordinary behaviour added impact to the telling, as did the means by which individuals were singled out, that is, incidentally, in a saying or event in a narrative, and not in the whole life view of a biography. This factor puts a limit on the sources available to achieve the desired scope — the past protecting its representation in the present, perhaps.

The range of experience of the writers shows in the diverse styles of these essays. Since both Maori and Pakeha (sometimes together) wrote them they offer examples for debate over how and by whom Maori history might best be written, and what there is to distinguish it from Pakeha history. The best biographies seemed to me to share qualities in common with the best texts of the oral tradition, that is, as statement based on a variety of sources, informed by interpretation, enlivened with anecdote and quotation, and benefitting from a familiarity with the subject derived from consanguinity or affinity.

The People of Many Peaks will certainly be appreciated by Maori for its single focus and by researchers for its compactness. Given the intensive interest in Maori history at present, a complete bibliography as an appendix, rather than the selective entries at the end of each essay would have added purpose to it. If my assumption about its underlying purpose is correct, then the question of whether Maori and Pakeha historians and readers find the aim, method and result of its production a good model for the risky business of writing about each other's histories remains to be answered by more talk, preferably talk in which purposes are made explicit, so that it is clear what exactly there is to review.

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