

*A Biography. Kate Sheppard. The Fight for Women's Votes in New Zealand — The life of the woman who led the struggle.* By Judith Devaliant. Penguin Books, Auckland, 1992. 242pp. NZ price: \$39.95.

IF THE NAME of Kate Sheppard had been mentioned twenty or more years ago, the response even among New Zealand historians may well have been, 'Kate who?' In the early 1970s Patricia Grimshaw's path-breaking *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand* placed Sheppard firmly at the centre of the suffrage movement in New Zealand, and since then she has received further attention in collections of biographical essays. Nearly one half of the documents in Margaret Lovell-Smith's *The Woman Question* (1992) are attributed to Sheppard, who has also figured prominently in a novel, has had a bookshop named after her, and in 1993 appeared on the new \$10 banknote. During Suffrage Centennial Year she has become 'Kate', an icon of sorts, New Zealand's most famous female historical figure, rivalled only by Te Puea and a figure of greater glamour but somewhat less nobility, Jean Batten.

Judith Devaliant's book is therefore very timely, although, as its dual subtitles suggest, it is both something more and something less than a biography. That it is more successful in delineating the fight for women's suffrage than in presenting a satisfying picture of Sheppard's life is not due to lack of effort by the author. Devaliant has done a sterling job of mining the material to which she had access, but the private Kate Sheppard remains an elusive figure. What we have here are some fragmentary glimpses of Kate Sheppard the wife and mother, painstakingly constructed from a few letters, comments by others, and reconstructions of Sheppard's movements. There is a lack of the subject's personal reflections, insights of the kind which made Frances Porter's biography of Jane Marie Atkinson, for example, so very compelling. Devaliant suggests some links between Sheppard's private life and public statements (about divorce reform, for example), but her lack of access to personal papers makes it difficult for her to take this very far.

Information from the family of Sheppard's second husband, William Lovell-Smith, has allowed greater access to Sheppard's later years. We see a woman of personal charm and warmth, who continued to dress stylishly and expensively, who ate with careful regard to her health, and who largely stood aside from the domestic tasks of a household which was ambivalent about her presence. Devaliant avoids sensationalizing Sheppard's relationship with William Lovell-Smith and her place in the Lovell-Smith household from the later 1900s. She acknowledges the rumours about the 'man with two wives', but concludes that there is no hard evidence for anything other than a platonic relationship between Sheppard and Lovell-Smith before their marriage in 1925.

On Sheppard's public activities and relationships the book is more complete. It does not challenge existing interpretations of the franchise campaign — Grimshaw remains the key reference work here — but it does give an interesting account of the campaign from Sheppard's perspective. There are a number of areas where *Kate Sheppard* adds significant detail of our knowledge of the early women's movement. The book carefully delineates the franchise network and Sheppard's key place within this movement, confirming her skill as a political strategist and her energy and persistence in promoting women's issues after the franchise was won. It shows how Sheppard's priorities and those of her key parliamentary ally, Sir John Hall, did not always mesh, as Hall's commitment to women's suffrage was intersected by party and strategic concerns.

The book also provides useful material on the early years of the National Council of Women and on New Zealand's links with the international suffrage movement. Sheppard was not only the central figure in the New Zealand women's movement, but she was a key point of contact for overseas suffragists, and Devaliant teases out these contacts more

fully than in any previous study. Sheppard was held in high regard by leaders of the women's movement elsewhere and, Devaliant suggests, she could have played a more prominent role on the international stage. Distance posed difficulties and Sheppard pulled back from personal participation in international gatherings after 1894, apparently on account of her fluctuating health (there is an intriguing reference to a nervous 'stumble' in public speaking while overseas which may have affected Sheppard's confidence in this arena).

Those seeking a 'reveal all' biography will be disappointed by this book; historians who have undertaken research into the first wave of the New Zealand women's movement will not gain radically new insights from it. *Kate Sheppard* is nonetheless a book they will want to own, a useful complement to the existing literature. It gives an overview of the women's movement in New Zealand from the 1880s to the end of the First World War from the perspective of its key participant, and fleshes out, as much as was possible, one of New Zealand's more attractive public figures.

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*Ettie: A Life of Ettie Rout.* By Jane Tolerton. Penguin, Auckland, 1992. 283pp. NZ price: \$39.95.

ETTIE ROUT was not a popular figure in New Zealand, nor is she today well-known in her homeland, though Jane Tolerton's book will do much to recover her memory and explain the process by which she was deliberately excised from many parts of the historical record. At her death, she had few friends or admirers with the power to prevent her being 'hidden from history' and many, indeed, believed she was best forgotten. In this the centenary year of women's suffrage in New Zealand, one can understand the antagonism she roused among those who might have been her allies in her comment to some visiting English suffragists that votes for women in New Zealand had spread 'a blighting mildew of "wowsersism"' in the land (p.85). Not that she opposed the vote or believed it had not achieved good, it was just that her perspective was quite different from that of more conventional feminists, middle-class or radical — and she did not mince her words. Her notion of patriotic comforts work during the Great War was far removed from that of the women who sat and waited at home, sewing, knitting and organizing fund-raising events. Reducing the incidence of syphilis and gonorrhoea among the New Zealand soldiers in Egypt, Britain and France became her special mission.

Jane Tolerton has written an absorbing and intelligent biography. Ettie Rout built her career in Christchurch on 'the two great vehicles of women's liberation in the late nineteenth century — the bicycle and the typewriter' (p.26). Her expertise as a shorthand recorder provided plentiful employment in government enquiries and the courts, though her sympathies lay with freethought and the emerging labour movement. She was attracted by radical experiments in communal living and also joined Fred Hornibrook's School of Physical Culture, adopting the loose, uncorseted style of dress he and other physical culturists recommended. Ettie helped found the *Maoriland Worker* in 1910, though it was quickly taken over by the New Zealand Federation of Labour. She was never a good joiner or member but essentially a radical individualist; her socialism was not of the 'scientific' and materialist kind espoused by the Red Feds.