

Convent Girls. By Jane Tolerton. Penguin, Auckland, 1994. 221 pp. NZ price: \$24.95. ISBN 0-141-16795-1.

'I'VE MADE my living out of the nuns. They set me up for everything I've done since', begins Catherine Saunders in Jane Tolerton's *Convent Girls*. Saunders' comment will no doubt strike a chord with many women who have had a Catholic education in New Zealand, but it will also polarize others. *Convent Girls* is a collection of interviews the author conducted with 17 prominent New Zealand women about their childhood and adolescence with 'the nuns', and reveals a variety of attitudes towards their days exposed to the smell of candlewax and the rustle of rosary beads. The author aims to discover what makes a 'convent girl' different, why they seem to stand out from the crowd, and focuses on what she considers to be the most salient features of women raised as Catholics: an irreverent sense of humour, a well-developed sense of social justice, and an ability to stand up and say their piece.

Tolerton abandoned the idea of presenting each of her interviewees with the same questions in favour of beginning with a wide question to open the topic and then 'let the interviewee go'. As a result each account is a frank and reflective appraisal of personal history that does not appear formulaic or contrived. Tolerton is also conscious of her position as an 'outsider', as a non-Catholic attempting to understand the world of the convent girl. Her anxiety that 'This is not my territory . . . I should not be traversing it', parallels that often felt by the historian coming at a subject from the outside. This dilemma is solved by the interviewees, who as Tolerton notes, found it better that way, 'otherwise they thought that one might bring too much baggage to the exercise — baggage loaded down with axes and grindstones'.

Convent Girls deals both with the classic tales of a convent education and the less memorable moments. Many recall with warmth the smell of incense and the theatricality of the mass with its rich language, imagery and symbolism. For others, there is resentment against the emphasis on 'purity', the way in which sex and sin were treated as synonymous, and the subservient role taken by the nuns within the hierarchy of the Church. Many of the women interviewed saw the nuns as mentors and positive role models, as strong and eminently capable women who managed the world within their authority. Paula Ryan recalls the consummate skill and confidence of the Dominican nuns, while Ngahua Te Awekotuku remembers the amazing blend of serenity and strength of the Sisters of Mercy. For others, however, the nuns were a breed apart and they criticize the hypocrisy of the church over such issues as sexual repression and contraception. It is largely for these reasons that many of these women feel they can no longer belong to a church which fails to acknowledge their role and their needs as independent women.

The personal narratives in *Convent Girls* may also be read as cultural commentaries on New Zealand society. For the social historian these accounts provide insights into the attitudes held by New Zealanders towards religion and religious tolerance. More than one woman recalls the sectarianism they encountered as children, with variations on the 'Catholic dogs stink like frogs' theme. A constant motif is that of difference, of being separated from the mainstream culture not only by faith but by the sub-culture of Irish Catholicism. For Ngahua Te Awekotuku, her political conscience and consciousness came from being a Maori child taught by Irish nuns. The awareness of social justice appears to have been nurtured by the Irish connection with Catholicism, which emphasized the suffering of the Irish at the hands of their English colonizers: or as one woman recalled, 'keeping the faith' meant 'keeping it Irish'.

Convent Girls belongs to the genre of recent publications which celebrate women's

experiences and achievements. Like *Beyond Expectations* (1986) and *Head and Shoulders* (1986), *Convent Girls* concentrates on women who have succeeded in their chosen careers. The interviewees in this book are all prominent women who were approached by the author to comment on their convent educations because they had mentioned it in the public arena, and include Fran Wilde, Stephanie Dowrick, Ginette McDonald, Pam Corkery, Maggie Barry, and Moana Maniapoto-Jackson, among others. These women do represent a variety of schools, orders, and age groups, but one is left wondering about the fortunes of those women who did not come to the attention of the author. How do they remember their school days with 'the nuns'? What was the effect on their later lives? Moreover, while many of the experiences documented in this volume are particular to a Catholic education — the excitement of one's First Holy Communion, for instance — others could as well apply to pupils of denominational schools, to private girls' schools, to single-sex schools, or even to all schoolgirls of a particular era.

Convent Girls is both a successful explication of the convent girl experience and a fascinating piece of oral history, which will also appeal to an audience beyond those who can claim a similar Catholic heritage. 'The nuns got hold of me when I had just turned four', confessed Germaine Greer, '[and] at that young age I had no chance of turning into anything but a convent girl, and I'm really rather glad'. Despite the misgivings of some of the women in this book, most would agree with Greer's admission, although few are still practising Catholics. The irony is, as Michael King wrote in *Being Pakeha*, 'Whatever one does or believes subsequently, the cultural conditioning of Catholicism, especially Irish Catholicism, has a certain indelibility You can leave the Faith, but does the Faith leave you?'

GISELLE M. BYRNES

The University of Auckland

Children's Health, the Nation's Wealth, A History of the New Zealand Health Camps. By Margaret Tennant. Bridget Williams Books with the Historical Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1994. 295 pp. NZ price: \$34.95. ISBN 0-908912-68-4.

MOST NEW ZEALANDERS have some familiarity with the institution of the health camp: some have been sent there, some worked there, and many more have bought a first day cover at some time in their lives. *Children's Health* provides a comprehensive and fascinating examination of the New Zealand health camp. Margaret Tennant charts the rise of the health camp from voluntary summer camps, in the 1920s and 1930s, to the construction of permanent health camps in the 1940s and 1950s and a position as one of the last bastions of institutional care for children in the late twentieth century.

The health camp movement, like that other longstanding New Zealand organization, the Plunket Society, has come to symbolize New Zealand's commitment to its children. The camps attained a public profile that has remained strong since their inception. They reflect the changing attitudes to child welfare in the twentieth century. The camps began in the eugenicist atmosphere of the 1920s, where the emphasis was on fattening 'stock' (children) for the future, then flourished in the heyday of the welfare state in the 1940s and 1950s. During this period vast numbers of children were processed and cared for, but the size of camps has steadily diminished since 1960. The camps are in an embattled position in the 1990s, when the value of government intervention is being steadily