

Safeguarding the Public Health: A History of the New Zealand Department of Health. By Derek A Dow. Victoria University Press in association with the Ministry of Health, Wellington, 1995. 302pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 0-86473-285-6.

PUBLIC HISTORY has made steady progress in being recognized as a discipline with special prospects of providing an awareness and understanding of past government policy and its impact on today's society. At its best, public history offers both practitioners and readers a way into the minds and motivations of the politicians and bureaucrats who create and implement the legislation which helps to shape so many aspects of our lives. At its worst, it is history captured by the commissioning body in order to highlight perceived 'successes' and downplay or omit 'failures'. Or, as one critic of the genre put it, '[c]ritical distance is difficult enough to achieve when writing twentieth century history, a distance shortened by the purse-strings and obligations of contract work'.¹

Public history thus provides historians with a lens through which they can scrutinize their craft. Questions which seem to be specific to this mode of historical writing on closer inspection reveal a wider applicability. For instance, under the guise of 'objectivity' the political purpose of past historical writing could be concealed. Direct exposure to those most deeply affected by the subject of the history, however, makes this 'detachment' (or perhaps even arrogance) more difficult to achieve. Just as oral history techniques have made us question more closely our documentary sources, so public history can make us more aware of the political underpinnings of the surviving evidence.

Specific criticisms levelled at public and commissioned histories assume that those who are not directly paid to undertake a specific piece of historical work are somehow blessed and can rise above their own preconceptions and political biases. Worse, the very fact that money is involved taints the work directly and will 'inherently' produce a work the commissioners will be happy with.² The parallels of this to criticisms levelled at professional sportspeople cannot be wholly fortuitous.

Another question which must be asked of commissioned histories is whether particular aspects of society are privileged at the expense of others. In other words, will the fact that formal institutions and organizations are more able to pay to have their histories written — in comparison, say, with voluntary community groups — help to perpetuate the idea that these forms of history are somehow more worthy and important?

Public health is a good case in point. As Jan Sundin has remarked, 'Research interests sometimes develop for obscure reasons, suddenly occupying scholars everywhere. The historical study of public health and preventative medicine is one example.'³ So Dr Derek A. Dow's new publication, *Safeguarding the Public Health: A History of the New Zealand Department of Health*, fits neatly into a growing genre of medical history writing, as well as engaging with the question of the role and work of public health officials in the changing role of the state in the health and well-being of the New Zealand populace.

And contrary to David Cantor's claims, just because a piece of work is commissioned does not necessarily compromise its claims to scholarship. Dow has obviously an intimate knowledge of his departmental archives, and has synthesized an extraordinary amount of detail into a readable and informative history of public health in New Zealand.

If I have a major criticism it is that the work does not go far enough. And it may be this

1 D. Cantor, 'Contracting Cancer? The Politics of Commissioned Histories', *Social History of Medicine* 5, 1 (April 1992), p.132.

2 *ibid.* p.140.

3 J. Sundin, 'The History of Public Health and Prevention: Current Swedish Research', *Journal of the Social History of Medicine*, 5, 3 (December 1992), p. 517.

point which is at the heart of the negative perceptions of the work of commissioned historians. Unless specified otherwise in the contract, commissioning bodies can direct the ultimate shape of the book. In one case to my knowledge, the commissioned author was given the chapter titles before the research was even begun. As Dow notes in his introduction, 'the book inevitably concentrates on developments as seen from the centre,' and that the 'day-to-day work of the staff who form the backbone of the service awaits a different kind of history and another historian'. It would be interesting to know who decided to concentrate on the 'centre'.

An instance of the problems which may arise by focusing on the 'centre' is the author's claim that there was only desultory interest until the twentieth century in the 'problems of overwork and overcrowding in the classroom'. This may well have been the case for the department. However research undertaken in this field seems to suggest that teachers and indeed parents were quite concerned — particularly but not solely — about girls' schools during the nineteenth century. Many went to great lengths — not the least of which was the introduction of school sports — to overcome the *general* perception that schools were unhealthy places for young people.⁴

Somewhat more disquieting is the treatment of the Directors-General of Public Health. If, as the author implies, the department's policies were driven from this key position then surely the reader could expect to learn a little about the incumbents: to learn what personally motivated them in the decisions they made. This never occurs. Indeed, the feeling from this book is that each of these men was driven only by a strong altruism: a questionable interpretation.

The juxtaposition of the roles of the Directors-General and those of women provides a subtle way of making the point. Dow notes that women predominated in the New Zealand School Medical Service, and this field ranked near the bottom of the medical profession's prestige hierarchy. This poses the question, 'why?', a question which is never addressed here. Why did medical women 'choose' such a low-status profession, when the possibility of much greater rewards were had from private — non-salaried — practice? What historical forces were operating which made this the 'choice' of the majority of the newly graduating women doctors? And why was the policy not to employ married women in any capacity in the department not discussed until the policy was changed in 1967?

Dow is without doubt a skilled practitioner of history. The book is dense with information about the department's workings over the past 100 or so years. So what is happening here? It would not be easy to dismiss the work — along with Cantor and the like — as displaying the gaps 'inherent in commissioned histories'.⁵ For a start, and unlike Cantor's reviled authors, Dow is a professional historian with a better than average knowledge of medical history. Nor would it truly represent the problem with the book as I see it. For it is a scholarly publication. Perhaps it is true that the department's successor, the Ministry of Health, kept a remarkably firm hand on the production of the final form of the book. But that would only be speculation on my part. If it were the case, many, I'm sure, would not blame them — after all their money paid for it. One might wonder, however, why anyone would bother employing a professional historian at all if only to deny the author the right to exercise those professional skills unfettered.

Do people fear the power of history, and by association that of historians? Is there a general acceptance that the present is the product of the past, and therefore it is better not

4 L. McCarthy, 'Training the Body or the Mind?: Debates about the 'higher education' of girls in late-19th century New South Wales', MA thesis, UNSW, 1991.

5 Cantor, 'Contracting Cancer', p.140.

to acknowledge bygone failures or mistakes of the past? For space reasons, the related issues raised here, concerning who 'owns' history, and the lack of recognition given to the broader interpretative skills employed by trained historians, can only be referred to.

I hope that in the future the author will publish articles based on this commission, articles which wrestle with the problems of evidence and perhaps broaden our views on the context in which the Department operated. But it would be a pity if these articles saw the light of day only in our treasured but much more audience-specific professional history journals. They deserve the same audience as the book. The argument of audience is perhaps the key. Publishers claim that the writings of academically trained historians are boring, and I fear that many of us have accepted this prejudice and so 'write differently' for a broad market. I think that it is time that historians treated the wider world to the challenges and debates we are happy to provoke within our own small community.

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The Turnbull: A Library and Its World. By Rachel Barrowman. Auckland University Press in association with the Historical Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Auckland, 1995. 232pp. NZ Price: \$39.95. ISBN 1-86940-137-9.

PRIOR TO PUBLICATION, Rachel Barrowman's history of the Alexander Turnbull Library was billed as a cultural history rather than an institutional history. As it turns out, it is both, and to Barrowman's considerable credit these two aspects do not simply co-exist but actively reinforce each other. In its role as the official history of an institution, the book crisply charts the library's growth and its relation to changes in publishing, government patronage, bureaucracy, the Turnbull's clientele, and the nature of librarianship. In the copious photographs as well as in the text, it examines a broad cross-section of the staff, not just the heads. Barrowman manages to impart a large amount of 'institutional' information without making the book feel anything like a dull chronicle.

'Institutional' matters come together with cultural ones in the book's evocation of the intellectual milieu in which the Turnbull has played such an important role. This is so especially in the chapter on the library during the reign of its first chief librarian, Johannes Andersen. Barrowman offers a rich account of an intellectual 'world' that revolved around Pakeha practices of collecting. Like Alexander Turnbull himself, the library assiduously collected books and manuscripts. But it was also a site of 'collection' in a wider sense: a home base for the compilation of ethnological material on Maori and historical material on Pakeha. The later chapters lack some of the resonance of the one devoted to this early period, not because of any fault on Barrowman's part, but because the intellectual centre of gravity moved away from the Turnbull after this time. The Turnbull has been, and still is, deeply implicated in New Zealand scholarship and literature. After Andersen's time, though, the lines between collecting and commenting, between librarianship and scholarship, became sharper (though as the case of Graham Bagnall shows, the transition was not entirely linear).

This process of transition is central to the book. A well-established narrative in New Zealand historiography is the professionalization of 'high culture' from the end of the 1930s, when, among other things, 'the New Zealand scholar' arrives in the universities.