

the strongest powerhouse of political administration in our nineteenth century. The Hall papers at both the Turnbull and Canterbury Museum libraries have been mined extensively, and the Hall family itself possesses at least an equivalent mass of archival material. However, by adopting a topical rather than the far more difficult but more customary chronological approach to unravelling a life, Garner has sacrificed any chance to recreate the flow and highlight the interaction of private with public life that is so crucial a function of biography and must be central to explaining Hall's political career.

In Canterbury provincial politics he was a dominating force in several of the most effective executives which existed in any province. In the House of Representatives and Legislative Council he was always one of the readiest and best prepared (if not the most interesting) of speakers; a man others consulted in the cigar-smoke laden air of Bellamy's where factions negotiated and from which the coalition ministries of the pre-1890 period emerged. Garner has too little to say about this. She also, curiously, downplays Hall's very significant opposition role in the rump session of 1858. Nor does she enlighten us about Hall's uneasy relations with FitzGerald in the early Canterbury provincial councils. To FitzGerald, Hall was 'a mere clerk without policy, captious and egotistical, but he is the best man next to Tancred'. For Fanny FitzGerald, a very young woman then of quicksilver wit and strong opinions, Hall was 'the greatest boor and nuisance alive'. To the aristocratic FitzGerald Hall always remained the worthy but dull post office official of his Yorkshire and London youth. Unfortunately that impression is too often reinforced by this book.

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The Women's Parliament: The National Council of the Women of New Zealand 1896-1920. By Roberta Nicholls. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1996, 144 pp. NZ price: \$29.95. ISBN 0-86473-299-6.

NEW ZEALAND HISTORIANS sometimes accuse each other of a 'been there, done that' attitude to history-writing, traversing topics once only, and generating a thin literature on any given subject. This is certainly not the case with the historiography of women's suffrage, first-wave feminism and feminist organizations such as the National Council of Women (NCW). We have a healthy literature on these topics, stretching back to the beginnings of modern women's history in the 1970s. Roberta Nicholls' *The Women's Parliament: The National Council of the Women of New Zealand 1896-1920* is a further addition to this field.

Published to coincide with the NCW's centenary in 1996, *The Women's Parliament* traces the inception, decline and revival of the Council, shedding light on aspects of first-wave feminism in the process. Nicholls eschews a detailed recounting of the story of how the vote was won, focusing instead on the activities and aims of the Council in its first decade, 1896-1906, and in its revived form, 1918-20. Into this period of recess — 'The Interregnum' — she inserts a fascinating account of New Zealand suffragist Anna Stout's involvement with the militant wing of the English suffrage movement. Stout had an ambiguous relationship with the NCW, and her role in the revived Council after 1919 was eased because 'the focus on political subjects . . . had gone' (p.108); the relevance, then, both to the NCW and to this book of Stout's participation in a highly political organization

in Britain is far from apparent. Nicholls would have done better to explore fully the activity of feminist groups in New Zealand over this period as a way of exploring the reasons for the resurgence of the Council.

In common with other historians of first-wave feminism, Nicholls argues that the desire to inject a 'maternal influence' into politics to bring about legislative change ensuring equality and justice for all was a guiding principle for the Council at both its inception and revival. Through an analysis of speeches given at the first annual conferences and profiles of the women involved, she sketches a picture of an energetic group, increasingly beset by the consequences of a narrow membership base, growing radicalism, and an ageing and sometimes fractious leadership. It was by overcoming these problems, Nicholls suggests, that the NCW was able to reconvene in 1918, and to grow throughout the twentieth century.

The insistence on the pivotal role of the first Council in shaping New Zealand legislation is less convincing, however. Nicholls too quickly accepts NCW statements of credit in achieving 'humanitarian' social legislation around the turn of the century, and too quickly minimizes the role of the Liberals in creating social policy. The impact of women's suffrage on legislation is difficult to assess, as feminist historians elsewhere have discovered. Certainly more work is needed before it can be asserted that the Council 'stepped in to fill' a 'vacuum' in the Liberals' legislative programme (p.33).

While a frank analysis is provided of the problems of the first Council and the shufflings for power in the second, significant aspects of the NCW itself and the nature of women's organizations over the period remain unexplored. The establishment and revival of the Council, for example, were both predicated on the existence of active networking between women's groups and individual women. How these networks operated, whom they excluded, and how they shaped the nature of both councils are questions worth investigating.

Nicholls' explanations for the rise and decline of the Council, and first-wave feminism itself, are now established interpretations in women's history and more general New Zealand history. *The Women's Parliament* takes us down a road already travelled by the likes of Pat Grimshaw, Raewyn Dalziel and many others. In the end, I was left feeling that I was reading a very familiar tale. This is unfortunate, given the recent growth in the 'new' suffrage and first-wave feminist historiography which points to diverse ways of interpreting early feminism. Issues surrounding social class, citizenship, imperialism, scientific investigation and the construction of a racialized nation and womanhood reverberate throughout the texts Nicholls cites. She alludes in passing to some of these aspects of the NCW, but they demand closer attention; a fuller reading of this recent historiography would have helped her to examine these issues more rigorously. The material on which *The Women's Parliament* is based is wonderfully rich. It can be, and I would argue that it should be, read in ways which draw out the varieties and ambiguities of first-wave feminism, and which force us to think about feminism in different ways. It is to be hoped that future histories of women's organizations and first-wave feminism more generally will pick up these themes to explore our feminist past through different lenses.

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