

*Bishop in the Dock. The Sedition Trial of James Liston.* By Rory Sweetman. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1997. 327 pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 1-86940-160-3.

ON 17 MARCH 1922 James Michael Liston, a brilliant rising star in the New Zealand Catholic firmament, recently appointed Coadjutor Bishop of Auckland, succumbed to temptation. He delivered an emotional speech about the wrongs of Ireland to a packed Town Hall audience luxuriating in the emotions of the annual St Patrick's Day concert. The speech was enthusiastically received and probably gave the austere young bishop an unusually warm glow from having made emotional contact with his Auckland flock. A garbled newspaper report allowed a politically ambitious mayor also to experience warm feelings, for rather longer, as the sectarian hostilities of the 1920s flared and Liston was charged with sedition, tried, and eventually acquitted.

The Liston sedition trial was a sensation, one of the most significant of a string of such trials between 1912 and 1922 when the British Empire was perceived to be threatened from within by alien forces: Bolshevism; 'Romanism'; Syndicalism. The trials of labour leaders like Harry Holland are better remembered now, because they have become part of the fabric of labour history. Sectarian history has faded more quickly from our consciousness. Sweetman diligently examines the 'sectarian stew' of postwar Auckland, including the lurking antagonism between English and Irish Catholics (p.75). The mess may seem unappealing to modern tastes, but it is worth recalling that it was daily nourishment for many New Zealanders earlier this century.

Sweetman cites P.J. O'Farrell's criticism of historians who take 'an English view of appearances, accept English priorities, reflect Protestant value-judgements. The sub-world of Irish Catholics had no real existence for historians who wrote from and about the walled gardens of the establishment' (p.279). He has used the extraordinary occasion of the Liston trial as a tool to break down some of the walls and to expose the diversities and divisions within Pakeha society. His book is based upon thorough research and expert knowledge of the subject and its context. It adds to our understanding of Pakeha culture and makes a considerable contribution to the history of Auckland.

The care which he has taken with the biographical research imparts a dense and satisfying context to the events described. Liston's strengths and weaknesses are clearly outlined. His own contributions to the imbroglio are analysed. This book is no exercise in martyrology. Other characters are effectively presented: the truculent Solicitor-general, W.C. MacGregor, pugnacious and talented P.J. O'Regan, the bumbling J.L. Conlan, and Liston's crowd of vociferous and not invariably helpful supporters. Sweetman offers a new perspective on W.F. Massey. By paying careful attention to Massey's stance in relation to the Marriage Amendment Act, 1920, and to Irish and sectarian issues in general he corrects the facile assumption of Irishmen like Dr James Kelly of the *Tablet* that the Prime Minister was as bigoted as they were themselves. In sharp contrast, Mayor Gunson, who seems to have been something of a connoisseur of sedition among ethnic minorities and may have looked to profit from the 'hysterically patriotic atmosphere of postwar New Zealand' (p.129), met his come-uppance in the 1926 byelection for Auckland Suburbs. The Irish and Dalmatian voters of West Auckland had the last word when they voted for Labour and H.G.R. Mason and rejected Gunson in what had been hitherto a 'safe' Reform seat.

Liston's trial produced a concatenation of circumstances involving politics and law. The political prosecution of a bishop was no light undertaking, but once begun, it was inexorable. Liston's camp, many of them familiar with the arcane workings of ecclesiastical machinery, seem not to have comprehended the political and legal exigencies. 'After vigorous cranking, the machinery of the law had finally shuddered into action', when

Cabinet decided to allow a summons to be served (p.180). Only P.J. O'Regan understood the gravity of that step. Thereafter, the lawyers were in charge and Sweetman does an excellent job of dissecting the legal issues and the shaping and presenting of the Crown's case and the bishop's defence.

In his preface Sweetman asserts that he aims to tell a story and there are some splendid stories here — the detailed set piece of the 1922 St Patrick's Day celebrations, the accounts of the lower court hearing and the sedition trial itself. In some small respects this book does not meet the usual high standards of the Auckland University Press. I detected a few typographical errors, one important (the misspelling of Thomas Wilson Leys on p.23). The quality of the reproduction of the illustrations is often poor. Other faults may be ascribed to Sweetman's over-exuberance. There are too many lists of quotations, especially from newspapers. It is hard to see the point of some excursions — into the topic of sectarianism and the police in chapter xi, for example.

The harsh sectarian bigotry of the 1920s has been overtaken by other passions, but *Bishop in the Dock* provides an instructive case-study as to how we dealt with controversy, grievance and value issues at that time.

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*Holding the Balance: A History of New Zealand's Department of Labour 1891-1995.* By John E. Martin. Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 1996. 478 pp. NZ price: \$49.95 (limpbound). ISBN 0-908812-61-2.

*HOLDING THE BALANCE* is an official history of the Department of Labour prepared under the auspices of the Historical Branch, written by John Martin, one of New Zealand's leading labour historians. It is a very welcome and timely addition to our historical literature, not least because the role and function of the state remains one of the hot issues of current political debate.

In seven chronological chapters the book spans just over 100 years of history. Born in 1891, the department in its early years was an unashamedly partisan enterprise focused especially on the issue of unemployment and the need to ameliorate its effects on society. In the 1990s unemployment is no less an issue yet the department has evolved into a very different beast, less activist and certainly less partisan in favour of the victims of economic cycles. This transformation from partisanship to so-called 'neutrality', which occurred surprisingly early in the century, is one of the major themes of the book. While the process of story telling is restrained, dispassionate and seldom riveting, the extensive detailing of the development and transformation of the New Zealand state, at least as represented by the Department of Labour, is in itself sufficient to recommend this book to readers.

Another theme of the book is the octopus-like expansion of functions carried out by the department. Over time more and more activities came under the umbrella of the Labour Department. We learn of the state farm, the barmaids' register, the supervision of weights and measures, and a myriad of other activities. New light is shed on many areas of New Zealand history and new subjects are brought in for the first time. Sometimes, however, the attempt to cover, no matter how briefly, the totality of the department's activities breaks up the readability of the text and lessens the impact of the overarching arguments.