

Correspondence

Dear Editor

MICHAEL BASSETT'S review of my *In Stormy Seas: The Post-War New Zealand Economy*, opens with 'This book has had a bad press from economists and a business newspaper' (NZJH, 32, 2 (1998), p.222). I do not know whether he is referring to Joe Wallis in *New Zealand Books*, Keith Rankin in *Political Review*, or to David Mayes in *The Economic Journal*. If they are 'bad' reviews, Bassett's could only be described as 'rotten'. Admittedly not all reviews have been as favourable, but with the exception of the business newspaper and Bassett's they have not been ill-tempered and unscholarly.

Bassett does not seem to understand the discipline of economic history. He says, 'the nearest Easton gets to a primary source is a published departmental document. National Archives has splendid Treasury and Industry and Commerce files. With persistence one can access documents as late as 1986. . . . One would have thought that an economic historian would find such files meat and drink. Not so. Nowhere in Easton's writings [sic] have I been able to find more than exiguous use of archival sources.' I mention in passing that I do use archival sources as those with familiarity of my writings on the Tiriti o Waitangi and on Bernard Ashwin demonstrates. [sic] Moreover, although Bassett seems unaware of the procedure, one can get archives well after 1986 by the use of the Official Information Act. Bassett states that I believe that the 'Rogernomes . . . dropped enough hints about a pending devaluation to create a foreign exchange crisis'. Not only would Bassett be completely unable to offer a single citation to support that I hold that view, for I do not, but in a work cited in the book I used official papers to show it is wrong. Even so, such archives are not the 'meat and drink' of economic history, as any review of earlier New Zealand studies would demonstrate. John Condliffe, Gary Hawke, John Gould, and Colin Simkin use the standard economic models, to describe and evaluate the path of the economy and its consequences. To confine the discipline of economic history to official archives would not only redefine and limit the subject, but miss the point of what it is trying to do — to offer an account of how the economy evolves, not how a group of officials and politicians thought it was evolving at the time.

Relying only on archives has its limitations. Consider Bassett's biography of Joseph Ward. Despite assiduous reading of the available archives, he made little sense of the economic context. Ward is portrayed as being a successful colonial treasurer and a less successful prime minister. Those familiar with New Zealand's economic history know the economy went through a climacteric about the time that Ward changed roles, with an evident slowdown of the secular growth rate. The possibility, not addressed by the Bassett biography, is that the apparent deterioration in Ward's political performance reflected the economic environment in which he was working.

Bassett's review makes no reference to the 120-odd tables and figures in the book, which might be useful to a numerate historian. His analytical understanding is extraordinary. One may but chortle at his coinage of 'unreal exchange rates' (even if the book explicitly mentions the dangers of using the 'real' in this way on p.17). He says he found the diagram on p.37 'unintelligible'. I have used the diagram in a number of learned papers, in *Listener* columns, and in numerous teaching situations, and that is the first time that adjective has been used. Bassett complains that 'terms like

“purchasing power parity” . . . are suddenly introduced’. The term is first used on p.11, with a brief description and an explicit reference to the main exposition on pp.19–21. I am not sure how one avoids introducing any new concept ‘suddenly’, but the import of Bassett’s comments is that concepts unfamiliar to him may not be used, reducing any exposition to a lowest common denominator of the New Zealand history profession. Even so, I don’t understand how an LCD can so confidently state ‘There is a great deal of hocus pocus masquerading as economics’.

Finally, I must defend my publisher, the University of Otago Press. For the record the manuscript was read for them by two scholars. (In addition, it was earlier read in entirety by four other economists, parts were read by others, plus, of course, much of the material has been published in learned venues.) Bassett concludes ‘Have we reached a stage in academia where anything goes? If so, it just might be the most serious outcome of the last 14 years’. I will not judge whether the worst thing to happen since 1984 has been my book, but merely suggest that MPs, and apparently some ex-MPs, do not always realize how pathetic the rhetoric of the parliamentary debating chamber sounds to those outside.

BRIAN EASTON

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Dear Editor

I APPRECIATE Peter Lineham’s largely genial comments about *God’s Farthest Outpost: A History of Catholics in New Zealand* in the October 1998 issue of the *New Zealand Journal of History*. It was not a book which I would have submitted for review to a professional publication.

In addition to commenting on the book that appeared, however, he makes comparisons, unfavourably, with a notional book that never eventuated; speaks of an ‘opportunity [which] may not come again’; and says that the book was commissioned ‘a long time ago’. In the light of these remarks, all of which are misleading, I feel I ought to provide some background to the genesis, death, and rebirth of this book.

I did not sign a contract to write it until 1995. It appeared in 1997 — not, I would have thought, an inordinate length of time.

Five years prior to this, however, the book’s original sponsors sent out a flier ‘announcing’ the project, and seeking expressions of interest in it. It was in fact an exercise in market research, to gauge potential readership. I had no part in this exercise (apart from unwillingly providing a photograph of myself) and advised against it.

At that stage I had been asked by Catholic Communications, the media arm of the church, and the Tablet Printing Company if I would accept a ‘commission’ to write such a book, and I had said that I would. I put the word in inverted commas because commission implies the making available of financial resources and access to archives — neither of which eventuated.

Catholic Communications and *The Tablet* supported my funding applications to other bodies; but all these applications were unsuccessful. While this was going on I discovered that, with the exception of Auckland, none of the diocesan archives were to be opened to me, except in the most restricted of circumstances (in other words, these bodies did not recognize the arrangement I had as any kind of ‘commission’). Then the personnel at Catholic Communications changed and the new director, an Australian, had no interest in supporting a history of the church in New Zealand. Not long after this *The Tablet* board made a commercial decision to cease all publishing activities and return to its core business, printing.

I was then left with the project which had been 'announced' and 'commissioned' — but which now had no funding, no sponsor and no publisher. It was at this point that Penguin took over and I delivered to them the only book I was able to write in these unresourced circumstances. When people say to me now that this was not an ideal way for a freelance scholar to write a book I can only agree, wholeheartedly.

One final comment. Peter Lineham asserts that my own experience of Catholicism 'obviously came to an end about the time of the Vatican reforms'. Not so. I remain a Catholic who has been, at times, intensely involved in religious activities, and at other times not. But my interest is constant. I spelled out in the foreword why I did not carry my 'memoir' beyond Vatican Two: because that council 'provided a break with the continuities of the previous 130 years; and it is difficult to impose historical perspective on a recent and controversial period of rapid change'.

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