

Obituary

DAVID HAMER, 1938–1999

IN MAY THIS YEAR the New Zealand historical profession lost one of its most distinguished historians when David Hamer died suddenly, at his home in Wellington. Characteristically, he was in the middle of two books when he died: David's published output was prodigious.

David was appointed to a Chair in History at Victoria University of Wellington in late 1970, after six years at the University of Lancaster and a brief return to Auckland, where he had earlier completed his MA. He was a skilful and proficient teacher with a remarkable capacity to render down complex processes, teasing out the vital elements of any historical situation. While there were more flamboyant and entertaining teachers on the staff, I doubt if any provided students with notes which offered such a rich interpretative guide when examination time came around.

He was a kindly, scrupulous and painstaking teacher at graduate level. This intellectual generosity extended to his colleagues within and beyond the department. During his teaching life David read countless manuscripts, passing on his advice to those who valued him as a mentor. It was a consistent aspect of his scholarship that he always honoured the work of his colleagues and took an interest in it. He did not always agree with the ideas and writings of other historians, but he respected dedicated scholars, whatever their views. He dignified their work by taking it seriously, accepting debate and controversy as essential elements of his profession.

David was a large, gentle, but somewhat reserved figure, who seemed incapable of anger or histrionics. He was an upright man without guile or artifice, who never schemed or plotted to achieve things but who worked in utterly transparent ways, shaped by a powerful logic, tempered by basic common sense and decency. If one were planning a coup or conspiracy, David would have been the last person one would have enlisted. He would not have known where to begin. He loved a political discussion and followed New Zealand and international politics with acute interest. He devoted a life of research to it, but, paradoxically, he could never have been a player in the world of politics.

He was a voracious reader. One of the most daunting things for an academic walking into David's study was the thought that he had read all the books which lined the room from floor to ceiling. He was increasingly pushed into a corner as the literature encroached on him. There was something perhaps symbolic about the shelving collapsing in his new office in the Old Kirk building in 1998, when he narrowly escaped being buried beneath the creative endeavours of hundreds of his professional colleagues.

Without question, David was the most productive and internationally renowned historian to have worked at Victoria University since J.C. Beaglehole. At Oxford in the 1960s he developed an interest in the politics and politicians of the Liberal movement and in one way or another this shaped his scholarly work for over three decades. It flowed through into his study of politics in New Zealand, where he was fascinated by the origins and nature of political allegiance.

His 1988 work on the Liberals in New Zealand led him into an interest in the professional and commercial life of rural towns and eventually to a comparative history of the urban frontier in the New World societies of New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the United States. Over the last decade his research thrust broadened, developing new, more theoretical and comparative strands. His published output included ten books and countless articles, chapters in books and reviews. Among them, he edited a special issue of the *New Zealand Journal of History* in 1980, focusing on New Zealand's social history: the first local collection of essays on this topic. At the time of his death he was working on a biography of Richard John Seddon, attacking it with his characteristic verve. Charlotte Macdonald commented what an odd conjunction this was: Seddon the colossal vulgarian and David Hamer who was anything but.

There was a direct relationship between David's research and writing, and his beliefs and attitudes. Like the Liberals of the nineteenth century, he had great faith in constitutional structures and processes, in judicial procedure and in toleration. He assumed the essential reasonableness of people and their capacity to work within systems to effect change. He disliked departure from, or disregard for, process, believing that it corrupted decision-making and denied people their voice.

In a university context he was a great advocate for a collegial approach to dealing with problems or promoting change. As the years went by his experience, efficiency and industry meant he was drawn into one administrative role after another, both within and without the university. He served as Dean of Arts and between 1991 and 1994 was assistant Vice-Chancellor, becoming the first non-Vice-Chancellor to chair the Academic Board. He carried out this role in a calm, fair and efficient way. Externally, he became formally involved in the work of the National Library, the Historic Places Trust, the New Zealand Historical Association, the Historical Branch of Internal Affairs and the heritage movement. He was an editorial advisor to this *Journal* from 1972 until his death.

Whatever his administrative or teaching burdens, his research and writing continued unabated. He was able to sustain this because of quite remarkable

powers of concentration. He had a capacity to focus on the object in hand with a single-mindedness which was staggering. Although his research output was one product of this ability, it was also deployed in the interests of individuals and institutions. If one went to see David, he would put aside the papers on which he was working and give you his undivided attention. While you were with him he was fully absorbed in your problem. When you left his office he seemed able to pick up his work again and resume exactly where he had left off.

David gave almost 30 years of loyal and dedicated service to Victoria University and over 40 years to the study of history and to the historical profession. He was a beacon and a powerful guiding force. The profession is diminished by his loss.

DAVID MACKAY

Victoria University of Wellington