

REVIEWS

Windows on a Chinese Past Volume 3. By James Ng. Otago Heritage Books, Dunedin, 1999. 472 pp. NZ price: \$165.00. ISBN 0-908774-66-4.

JAMES NG'S *Windows on a Chinese Past* is a four-volume work. As with the previous volumes of this remarkable series, Volume 3 is notable for its extensive bibliographical references, meticulous footnotes and exhaustive index. The book is also beautifully illustrated with historical photographs and charts, a number of which are in colour. The publishers should be congratulated on their commitment to the project and willingness to include such a wealth of illustrations and supplementary materials, thus bringing the history of the New Zealand Chinese to life.

This particular volume is subtitled 'Larrikinism and Violence: Immigration Issues: 20th Century Assimilation: Biographies'. There is no obvious discernible thematic development linking the four sections of the volume, and the author probably intends each section to be treated quite separately.

The first 80 pages of the book survey the larrikinism and violence of the Alexandra goldfield areas. Ng starts by stating that the random violence and bullying of the hapless Chinese by European children and adults was the result of 'antipathy but not apartheid' (p.23). However, his extremely detailed descriptions of some of these incidents reveal that what started off as practical jokes resulted in tragic deaths. Ng also devotes several pages (pp.14-22) to the Magnus brothers, Swedish immigrants and avowed tormentors of the Chinese. They were responsible for the 'Lost Chinaman hoax' in 1895, when a dead sheep was dressed up as a Chinese, abandoned at a river's edge and then taken to the Alexandra police as the body of a lost Chinese. Even more graphic accounts are given for the two most notorious murders involving the Chinese. First, the 1880 Kyeburn murder of Mary Young and Ah Lee's guilty verdict; second, the 1905 Wellington Haining Street murder of a crippled elderly Chinese by white supremacist Lionel Terry. While the descriptions of these cases are colourful and vivid, the author's conclusions are surprisingly mild and gentle. He finds that even at the height of the anti-Chinese climate, 'the New Zealand-Chinese lived tolerable lives alongside their European neighbours', and concludes, rather lamely, that 'Time passes and good prevails in the end' (p.79).

Although the volume covers the history of the Chinese to the present decade, much more attention is given to the earlier period. This is especially so for the section on immigration and the biographies. The section on immigration is 186 pages, but Ng covers 'The Newcomers' (post-1986 arrivals) in only 11 pages. In contrast, he traces meticulously how previous generations of Chinese were subjected to an exorbitant poll-tax and faced the daunting 'reading test' on entry. The White New Zealand policy, though unwritten, was strictly enforced until World War II, when Chinese women and children were temporarily allowed in as refugees. Ng shows optimistic familiarity when he outlines the experiences of his own generation, the refugee children who became university graduates and ventured into professions beyond the laundries and market gardens.

In contrast to the vivid descriptive accounts, the analysis of the role of Chinese immigrants in New Zealand, past and present, is rather one-dimensional and sketchy. In spite of the author's Chinese origin, he continues to uphold 'assimilation' as the ultimate ideal of the future of Chinese New Zealanders. The concluding remark on the children of the post-1986 newcomers 'growing up in this country . . . this valuable combination of New Zealand and Chinese attitudes in a sizeable number of young citizens will be, I believe, the most important benefit of the new Chinese migrations' (p.253) may be a suitable analysis of the author's own 1950s generation. It is far too simplistic when applied to the 1990s generation buffeted by changing economic winds and transnationalism.

The final 160 pages of the book are devoted to 14 biographies of famous Chinese. Only two are women — Matilda Lo Keong of Dunedin (arrived 1873) and Chin Toi Harr, who arrived as a refugee wife in 1939. The author does not give reasons for his

choice of the 14, and each biography is quite independent and separate from the others. The style of the biographies is traditional: besides giving details of their achievements, the life histories of their descendants and eminent surviving offspring are also given. Ng displays his considerable insider-knowledge as a community historian.

The strength of the book is in the material evidence: the reproduction of archival documents and old newspaper records. Drawing upon a broad range of images and verbatim reports of contemporary witnesses, the book evokes life as it was for the Chinese in bygone years. It is less successful in interpreting the broader issues underlying ethnicity and identity. There is little attempt to analyse the forces that shaped the Chinese as a marginalized minority. But it is an exemplary work of a historian who has lived through many changes in his community and is devoted to chronicling the many anecdotes that he feels should be kept for posterity. Perhaps it is not realistic to look for sharp focus or incisive analysis in a work that is intended to be an account of the various facets of the history of the Chinese community. As with the previous volumes, the book can best be used for reference purposes, as a source for checking primary materials. It fills an important gap in New Zealand historical studies, which have been largely Anglocentric.

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The University of Auckland

To Fight for the Empire: An Illustrated History of New Zealand and the South African War, 1899–1902. By John Crawford with Ellen Ellis. Reed in association with the Historical Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Auckland, 1999. 128 pp. NZ price: \$29.95. ISBN 0-7900-0703-7.

NEW ZEALAND sent 6507 soldiers, mainly volunteers, to fight in the South African War. Of these, 97 were killed in action, died of wounds or were accidentally killed. Many more were wounded. Another 133 died of diseases contracted while at the war, with some of these dying back at home in New Zealand. At the time the country had a population of less than a million people.

Imperial jingoism was illustrated at the embarkation of the First Contingent in 1899, with Prime Minister Richard Seddon affirming they were fighting for 'one flag, one Queen, one tongue and one country — Britain'. This optimism had paled by the time of the embarkation of the Tenth Contingent in 1902. Horrific conditions in the civilian concentration camps and the needless destruction of Boer farms and livestock were further realities of this war.

To Fight for the Empire is not the first work to study New Zealand's involvement in the South African War. Two attempts were made, in 1909 and 1929–1931, to write such a history but, due to army interference, the first is lost and the second remains unpublished. The first published official history had to wait 50 years: David Hall's *The New Zealanders in South Africa 1899–1902* was published in 1949 by the War History Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs. Hall focused on the activities of specific contingents and confessed that time constraints meant that official records were not widely researched, nor was he able to access personal reminiscences, letters and diaries. Histories of specific contingents have also appeared, such as in Richard Stowers' *Kiwi versus Boer, the First New Zealand Mounted Rifles in the Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902*. There have also been one or two published personal reminiscences, for example, Frank Perham's *The Kimberley Flying Column*.