

Reviews

Social History: Problems, Strategies and Methods. By Miles Fairburn. Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1999. 325 pp. NZ price: \$57.95. ISBN 0-333-61587-5.

AS MILES FAIRBURN establishes at the outset, *Social History* is not a textbook outlining the varied history, historiography, and nature of an influential — but nebulous — genre of historical writing. Rather, this sometimes taxing book deals with what is probably best termed the philosophy of historical methodology, analysing the forms of reasoning, justification, and problem-solving employed by those writing about the past. Systems of reasoning, usually implicit or hidden in the discourses of historians, are brought to the surface, categorized, and made explicit by Fairburn. Historical theory has demonstrated the tropes and patterning in historians' representations of the past: Fairburn can be seen to be performing a similar service to the logic of these practitioners' methodologies. The value of this book may well lie in forcing historians and students to be more reflective about the inherent contradictions in a range of their methodologies.

Fairburn's own methodology is comparatively straightforward. *Social History* is clearly structured, with chapters on each of the identified methodological problems: inclusion; generalizing; causality; categorization; evidence; present-mindedness; and explanation. This method of procedure is supported by liberal employment of headings, summaries, listed hypotheses and sub-hypotheses, diagrams, and a glossary. The book is wide-ranging (if somewhat dated) in its choice of case studies woven into the various chapters: E.P. Thompson, Braudel, Davidoff and Hall, Lawrence Stone, Carlo Ginzburg, Skocpol, David Fischer, Ian Carter, Alan Macfarlane, the Tillys, Thernstrom, Gatrell, Showalter, Eugene Genovese, Christopher Browning, and Daniel Goldhagen. And Fairburn provides some searching analyses of individual texts. One can envisage that some of these critiques could form the basis of good student seminar discussion.

However, Fairburn's book was very problematic for this reviewer. One question — never resolved — is whether Fairburn's strictures apply specifically to social historians (however defined), to historians generally, or to all those writing about the past (sociologists and literary critics are included in Fairburn's case studies). Since the author never defines what he means by social history, and includes in his discussion historians normally associated with cultural, economic, intellectual, and political history, or those whose institutional bases are completely outside the discipline, he is constantly dealing with a moving target of his own devising. Fairburn anticipates criticism that social history has no disciplinary unity, but does nothing to counter that objection.

Equally problematic is the lack of reference to the impact of poststructuralism on history writing. It was a late impact, admittedly, but has been extremely influential in more recent theory and practice. Even obviously relevant works are ignored: Dominick LaCapra's critique of Ginzburg's microhistory is not referred to in Fairburn's discussion of this very topic. This silence — ironic, given that the book's first chapter deals with absent categories — is related to the severing of methodology from theory inherent in Fairburn's whole approach. If he is writing about social history, it is social history with the theory left out. Some acquaintance with poststructuralism (beyond the mere dismissal of relativism) may have helped Fairburn to establish some connection.

REVIEWS

It also has to be said that structural clarity comes at the cost of stylistic elegance. *Social History* is not a graceful book. Fairburn is wedded to the counting approach to prose: thus we have five categories, seven standard problems, four rejoinders, a further threefold problem, five modes of inquiry — all before we have reached the end of the first chapter. There is too much labouring of explanation. In one memorable section we are treated to a discussion of the instability of social categories which deteriorates into a list of haddock-frying: 'The people who fried less than half a pound of haddock, could be split up into any number of subsets — by the amount of time it took them to fry the haddock, by the amount of salt and pepper they poured on the haddock . . . whether their fathers ate fried haddock — need I gone on? [sic]'. Indeed, no.

In short, it is difficult to work out the readership for this book. I am not convinced that it will be other than selectively useful for advanced students in history. Less-advanced students will be put off by the language: 'hypothetico-deductive', 'idiographic'. Those who wanted a guide to the concerns, approaches and history of social history will find instead a logic primer. Actual practitioners, if this reviewer is any indication, will be somewhat bemused. Will Catherine Hall really benefit from Miles Fairburn's criticism that she fails to recognize cultural complexity, given that she is one of the few historians to successfully negotiate the complex interactions of gender, class and race?

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The Gendered Kiwi. Edited by Caroline Daley and Deborah Montgomerie. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1999. 256 pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 1-86940-219-7.

IN THE INTRODUCTION to *The Gendered Kiwi*, Caroline Daley and Deborah Montgomerie note that it has been more common for historians to recognize women's experiences as 'gendered', rather than men's: in the historiography of the last 30 years 'the gendering of men remained largely implicit'. This excellent collection of essays by ten of New Zealand's best historians should certainly change this. Although the studies concern women's experiences as well as men's and the ways in which femininity and masculinity define each other, the most vivid contributions are, I think, those that examine the re-working of masculinity, in public and private, at work, at home, in recreation and on the playing field.

Some of the essays offer general discussions of the gendered assumptions of particular historiographical fields and the new directions of scholarship: Charlotte Macdonald takes issue with the demographic determinism that interprets women's status or lack of it in New Zealand as an outcome of their smaller numbers relative to men. By demonstrating the variability of population ratios across time and region and the specificity of generations, she asks us to reconsider the issue of historical agency: 'If gender analysis means an understanding of the social organisation of sexual difference, then numbers alone are not enough'. She also points out that demography-based arguments rarely take into account the changing population ratios of Maori and Pakeha and their changing interactions. Erik Olssen takes a different perspective on population dynamics and family formation in the colonial period and concludes 'it is much clearer now than it was twenty years ago that the idea of family was central not merely to the rhetorical invention of New Zealand as a New World society but also to socio-cultural practice'.

The fragility and dangers of family life were, on the other hand, graphically demonstrated in nineteenth-century courtrooms, where the 'dramas of private life' were played out on 'a public stage'. In 'Criminal Conversations: Infanticide, Gender and