

## Reviews

*The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Volume Five, 1941–1960*. General Editor Claudia Orange. Auckland University Press/ Department of Internal Affairs, Auckland, 2000. 679 pp. NZ price: \$130.00. ISBN 1-86940-224-3.

THE FIFTH VOLUME of *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, with its focus on the period from 1941 to 1960, completes the biographical series, which in all includes 3049 subjects written by over 1200 authors. The collection forms an elegant set on any bookshelf and an important contribution to New Zealand history. The editorial staff are to be congratulated for their diligence and speed in completing the entire project within ten years of the publication of the first volume.

Each of the previous volumes has received very positive endorsement from reviewers in this journal. Volume Two (1870–1900) received the seal of approval from Colin Matthew, then general editor of the British equivalent, the *New Dictionary of National Biography*, who described it as ‘an excellent contribution to its genre’.<sup>1</sup> His criteria for the success of a dictionary of national biography were that it be ‘representative, reliable, and readable’, though admittedly at that distance he was probably only able to assess the latter. Anyone involved in the historical community in New Zealand, however, knows of the wide consultation involved in choosing the subjects and the wide-ranging criteria for selection, which have throughout the volumes sought to provide representation that balances ethnicity, gender, activity and region. Anyone involved as a writer for the *Dictionary* can vouch for the fastidiousness of the editing process and the commitment to accuracy.

The reviewer of Volume Four (1921–1940), Malcolm MacKinnon, considered that its qualities as a reference book went without saying, and proceeded to judge that volume favourably as a ‘contribution to the present and future historiography of the inter-war period’.<sup>2</sup> Indeed the editorial goal, as expressed in Volume One (1769–1869), was not only to produce reliable reference texts but also to provide readers with an insight into the scope of New Zealand history.

Volume Five starts just after New Zealand had celebrated its centenary, 100 years since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. As such, the contents of this volume, perhaps even more than the previous volumes, are seen by general editor Claudia Orange as a contribution to our ‘national identity’, a ‘celebration of the many lives that have created New Zealand’s unique national character’ (p.vii). However, it is very much a case of letting history speak for itself. It is not the place of a dictionary to tell us how to interpret the past, and nor does the editor attempt to do so except in a very cursory way in the introduction referring to the significance of the Second World War, the two-party dominance in politics, and the changing roles of women and Maori in New Zealand society. While no overall interpretation is provided, it is not an understatement to say that no future New Zealand historian, of this period or any other, can afford to ignore the *Dictionary*. The interpretations placed on the lives of their subjects by the authors, and the very selection policy for the *Dictionary*, may indeed influence future history writing. The editor is to be applauded then for casting the net so widely and commissioning 432 authors to interpret the lives of the 613 individuals included in this volume, providing wide-ranging perspectives rather than limiting the interpretations to the few. Significantly, many of the 82 biographies of Maori were written by Maori writers, who have brought

their own strengths and knowledge of Maoritanga to the essays. Since Volume Two, Maori entries have been constant at around 13 or 14% of the total. The percentage of female entries does not seem to have varied much either, hovering around 20–30%. These statistics suggest that changes in post-war New Zealand society did not bring more Maori or women into public prominence, as one might expect. It might be reflective of the *Dictionary*'s policy of practising positive discrimination in the earlier periods, though given that there were six women included as 'businesswomen' in Volume Three (1901–1920) and only one in Volume Five, perhaps the impression of change over time needs to be revised. Comparing the fertility of the women included in Volume Five of the *Dictionary* with the national average, Orange makes the interesting observation that in the post-war period those engaged in child care were less likely than others to find a place in the *Dictionary*.

Comparisons between the specified categories in Volumes Three and Five indicate both continuities and change over the twentieth century. In both, women predominate in community activities and welfare. 'Suffragists' have of course become 'feminists'. In the latter volume there is no-one labelled 'political hostess' and no-one categorized as 'racist'! Nor are there any famous 'gardeners', 'birdwatchers' or 'axemen' as in the earlier volume, though we find a famous 'motor-racing driver', and female at that, Sybil Lupp. One of the more lively characters of Volume Five is Freda Stark, a 4 feet 10 inch tall dancer who, painted in gold and dressed only in a G-string and feather headdress, entertained American troops during the Second World War. The representation of Volume Five is of course also affected by the longevity of some people, a consideration that did not affect the earlier volumes. In addition, the fact that it is the last volume to be produced for some time dictated the inclusion of some who came to prominence in later decades but who are now deceased, such as Norman Kirk, Prime Minister 1972–1974.

The cut-off point between Volumes Four and Five is to some extent arbitrary, with the significant phase of some people's lives spanning several decades (for example, broadcaster Aunt Daisy — Maud Ruby Basham — appeared in Volume Four since her broadcasting career extended from 1928–1963). For this reason it is extremely useful that a full list of individuals included in all volumes is provided at the end of Volume Five, allowing one to locate them quickly. It also allows one to see at a glance who was omitted from the collection. In her introduction the editor invites readers to consult that list and nominate missing individuals for the *Dictionary*'s computerized database. The *Dictionary*'s Australian equivalent has published the list of 'those who missed out': *A Biographical Register 1788–1939: Notes from the Name Index of the Australian Dictionary of Biography*, compiled and edited by H.J. Gibbney & A.G. Smith, Vol. One, 403 pp., Vol. Two, 429 pp. (Canberra, 1987). Published after the issuing of Volume Twelve of the *Dictionary*, entries are up to 14 lines long, and provide brief career details and biographical references. It would be extremely useful if the New Zealand *Dictionary* produced a similar publication, which would allow wider access to the *Dictionary*'s database referred to by the editor.

The *Dictionary* has already become an essential research tool, and the New Zealand historical community owes a great debt to the *Dictionary* staff and its funding bodies, particularly the Department of Internal Affairs, which met about half the cost of the whole enterprise. While the thematic categories provided at the back of each volume are helpful, the impending electronic version will be even more useful, enabling the researcher to use the search facility. The printed version will remain indispensable, however, in enabling one to browse.

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1 *New Zealand Journal of History* (NZJH), 30, 2 (1996), p.194.

2 NZJH, 33, 1 (1999), p.117.