

Rural Canterbury. Edited by Garth Cant and Russell Kirkpatrick. Daphne Brasell Associates Ltd with Lincoln University Press and Whitireia Publishing, Wellington, 2001. 232 pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 0-909049-34-3.

NEW ZEALAND RURAL HISTORY as a study in its own right is launched in *Rural Canterbury*. There are large numbers of Canterbury country district histories: this book sets out to provide a regional perspective. What makes the difference? Unfortunately, the editors provide no explanation. Their principles must be deduced from their background and from the text. As they are historical geographers and the project is largely based on Lincoln University, it is not surprising to find that the main themes of this rural history are historical geography and agricultural economics.

There are considerable advantages in this approach. *Rural Canterbury* makes a strong statement as a study of humans, landscape and land use through text, illustrations, maps and diagrams. General features are reinforced by 'cameos' which adduce particular people, scenes, aspects or incidents. The themes are presented boldly and consistently and must leave a clear impression with the reader.

Rural Canterbury is extended both in time and area. The account of the Pakeha countryside is enclosed between two chapters on Ngai Tahu Canterbury. Sir Tipene O'Regan contributes an eloquent account of Maori regional society from Hawaii to Kaiapoi, Waitangi and beyond. Anake Goodall celebrates current Ngai Tahu achievement, and looks forward, like Pakeha authors, with cautious optimism.

Readers may well wonder how a Kaikoura whale is swimming on a Canterbury cover. Nowhere is it stated that this is the new Canterbury region reaching north to the Clarence River, an unhistorical extension made in 1974.

The Canterbury Plains constitute the 'most modified [landscape] in New Zealand' (p.193). In 2001 conservationists rightly dwell on the downside of these changes, the results of overstocking, burning, pests, weeds and fertilizing. John Grigg denounced the 'army of strippers' (p.77) who left the soil exhausted and eroded. Much of the high country, for Denis Glover the archetypal Canterbury, is being retired and may 'take centuries' to recover.

Yet the main thrust of *Rural Canterbury* (for all the obvious qualifications) is celebration. 'Canterbury farmers [helped produce] one of the most attractive landscapes in New Zealand' (p.93). Canterbury in the late 1940s was 'the wealthiest hinterland in New Zealand' (p.99). In the post-war years, growth continued until the end of the golden weather in the 1970s. Even thereafter, rural resilience has survived severe trauma.

Another major theme is continuity. The transitions from runholders' great estates to small-farm flocks and crops and so to deer, cattle and vines are clearly and concisely portrayed. Irrigation has been the greatest agent of growth. Agricultural science has played a major part. But the essential character and appearance of the farming landscape remains largely unchanged.

There are of course other views. Postmodernists, pursuing social deconstruction, will not find anything to celebrate in rural Canterbury: settlers oppressed their wives, devastated the natural landscape and thrust Maori aside. Conservationists denounced the depletion and pollution of Canterbury's great rivers. Some find the farming landscape merely a boring threshold to native forests.

Seen alongside the 2000 companion volume *Southern Capital, Rural Canterbury* presents some striking contrasts. Probably its major impact is visual. Scores of illustrations celebrate the Canterbury landscape. The book's format includes wide margins which emphasize the briefness of the chapters. The authors had a harder task in condensation. Within their chosen parameters, the editors have achieved a notable result in the popularizing of academic studies. But to me the heart of rural studies should be social history. There is quite a lot of it in *Rural Canterbury*, but it tends to be fitted round the

main themes. The central feature of early Canterbury rural society was the large family, statistically unequalled in New Zealand. From that base sprang the chief features of country social life, and much of farming development. Large families fuelled urban drift and internal migration. Unfortunately there is not a sufficient research base for a separate chapter on women. Schools were the first community centres, reaching their highest numbers about 1910; churches nearly matched schools in numbers in some parts of rural Canterbury. Country hospitals were established by strong community effort. Indeed, the swiftness with which Canterbury working immigrants produced leaders in local bodies and associations has not been sufficiently appreciated.

The mass of ordinary people are necessarily anonymous in summary accounts. Their leading men and women should not be. G.W. Forbes was Canterbury's longest-serving rural MP. He appears, unidentified, on p.108. Sir Walter Mulholland was probably New Zealand's leading farmers' advocate. Innovator in farm machinery and skilful photographer (four of his prints are used here), he deserves greater exposure than he is given on p.88. I suggest that the 75 cameos, which do not seem to follow any plan, could have been restructured to include biographies of outstanding men and women. I could nominate nearly a score.

JIM GARDNER

Christchurch

Southern Capital: Christchurch: Towards a City Biography 1850–2000. Edited by John Cookson and Graeme Dunstall. Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 2000. 395 pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 0-908812-87-6.

CANTERBURY UNIVERSITY is to be congratulated on publishing this volume of essays on its city. This is local history at its best, looking at broad themes over a comparatively long period, and relating the local experience to wider trends. Christchurch has been the subject of much historical research and the contributors have harvested the fruits of that research, while adding much of their own. Judging by the impressive list of theses on local topics now being undertaken at Canterbury, it will not be long before there will be ample material for another volume.

Inevitably the reputed 'Englishness' of the city is a theme that recurs. John Cookson, in particular, explores the development of this 'feat of imagination' ('Christchurch has always been more recognisable as a colonial and New World town') and its significance. One possible function of the myth — to draw a negative contrast between a supposed traditional 'English' rural social harmony and disruptive doctrines of class conflict — is perhaps overlooked. It was, after all, a myth largely nurtured by the better-off. The chapter by Katie Pickles on 'Workers and Workplaces' and Jim McAloon's on 'Radical Christchurch' demonstrate that Christchurch working people were frequently ready to contest the view that everything was lovely in 'the Garden City'. Pickles makes extremely effective use of quotations from the University of Canterbury Oral History Project on 'Work in Christchurch 1920–1950' in seeking to capture the experience of working people at their urban places of employment. There is a very long tradition of presenting the rural as the 'real' New Zealand and our larger towns as incidental, artificial, even parasitic. Trevor Burnard rightly reminds us in 'An Artisanal Town — The Economic Sinews of Christchurch' that 'Christchurch exists because it was willed into being; its early settlers wanted to live in towns, and fashioned Christchurch as the town in which they would live.' W. David McIntyre writes wittily on the architecture of the city and agrees with Cookson that Australasian and American