

Vision and Reality: Christchurch's Cathedral in the Square. By Colin Brown. Cathedral Chapter, Christchurch, 2000. 202 pp. ISBN: 0-473-07056-1. (No price supplied.)

THERE IS the strong presence of a surprising player in Colin Brown's history of the Anglican cathedral in the centre of the city: it is not the Anglican church, as in the history of the church published 70 years ago, but 'Christchurch', conceived of as a collective, vigorously opinionated and intensely interested in its central building. Newspapers like the *Press* and the *Star* expressed this opinion through leaders and letters to the editor. Well they might, for the story of this building, so much an icon of the city, has demanded its fair share of fund-raising, far higher than almost any other building in the dominion. And so there is a Christchurch of civic responsibility by generous donors, like Sir Heaton Rhodes, the context in which this story is placed. This meticulous portrait of a building and its alterations, additions and several incarnations has as its theme a church that came to symbolize the city. At this stage in the story it is now 'the cathedral in the Square', the symbol of the decorous proper English city which one part of the city has always wanted it to be. So the story is of choirs, of robes, of liturgies and of great civic occasions. But of course behind this image there is a different tone: the tone of clergy and officials in their intimate little wrangles with each other and with architects, civic officials, and in the most recent brouhaha over the visitors' centre and the redesign of the Square with the Historic Places Trust and other alternative guardians of that elusive concept, 'Christchurch'.

Colin Brown is not nearly playful enough with these concepts for my liking; I would have enjoyed more consideration of the conceptual difficulties of a religious building at the centre of a secular city, and of the entertaining contradictions of faith and values which this engaged. His measured, careful, meticulous tones do not forget the ecclesiastical building, the key focus of G.M. McKenzie in *The History of Christchurch Cathedral*, published in 1931, for Brown is very much an ecclesiastical historian, with a measured evaluation of changing liturgies and clerical personalities. The motif Brown uses is 'vision and reality'. Christchurch settlers were marked by their desire to have a cathedral, to be a diocesan city, and their reluctance to pay for it, which meant a long delay (until 1881) before it was commenced, and uncertainty about what it was supposed to mean in a secular society. Brown allows the argument to take new twists in a far more secular age. The cathedral chapter has been well served by this account for the new age.

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The Little Theatre: Golden Years of the New Zealand Stage. By Glyn Strange. Clerestory Press, Christchurch, 2000, 190 pp. NZ price: \$45.00. ISBN 09583706-9-9.

IT WOULD BE A PITY if New Zealanders who have an interest in our unutterably dreary society between 1920 and 1960 were to overlook this important book. True, it is written by a Christchurch man, about a long-gone Christchurch institution that few residents cared a fig for while it lasted, and those of you unlucky enough to live elsewhere may feel that the Garden City is an English enclave, not part of New Zealand at all. The subject, moreover, is theatre. At best a minority interest, this was *imported* theatre: plays written by and about people living overseas, performed — often very badly — by and for idle students, as opposed to busy workers on the land or in the towns. Hardly any of the plays discussed by Glyn Strange were written or set here, and Pakeha-Maori issues were untouched.

And yet this is a book for everyone living in these islands who has an interest in our struggle to do more with our lives than eat well, drink deep, play games, tramp about, sail boats, and admire the scenery. Among its principal characters, all linked by the Little Theatre, are James Shelley, Ngaio Marsh, Greville and John Pocock, Dan O'Connor, Jack Henderson, Paul Molyneux, Allen Curnow, Douglas Lilburn, Biddy Lenihan and Bernard Kearns. They all became well known far from Christchurch and, in most cases, far from the theatrical world. They represent that blessed minority who, by their own efforts and by the inspiration they gave to others, have done so much to make New Zealand an infinitely richer society — in every cultural, artistic, politically and socially alert sense — than it was before 1960.

Mr Strange adapted his sub-title from John Pocock's description of the 1940s in Christchurch as 'a small but unmistakable Golden Age' of New Zealand theatre. This may seem an extravagant claim, but Marsh's productions of *Hamlet* and *Othello* were taken to Dunedin, Auckland and Wellington in January 1945 (despite wartime restrictions and union obstruction), where they were enthusiastically received, and in December 1946 her production of *Macbeth* was acclaimed in Auckland and Wellington. These breakthroughs were followed in January 1949 by triumphs in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne with another *Othello* and Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*: triumphs unprecedented and, alas, unsucceeded.

The 'Golden Age', made possible by the happy combination of a dynamic director and several naturally gifted players, was all the more remarkable for its origin in so inadequate a venue. A flat-floored schoolroom with a tiny balcony, seating (at most) 200 people on hard chairs or benches, facing a narrow platform. There were no wings, no backstage area, no dressing-rooms, no lavatory or washing places, and only a primitive lighting arrangement. A storage area, illegally constructed above it, may have been the source of the fire that ended its career on Friday 13 February 1953, after 26 years of uncertain life. Those who knew it speak of the Little Theatre with nostalgic affection, but in fact most of its memorable productions appeared elsewhere, in Christchurch's Radiant Hall (Repertory Theatre) or on tour. As Strange records so thoroughly, those hardy souls who regularly attended the Little Theatre sat through numerous disasters.

The fact that such a 'theatre' is a major source of today's relative prosperity in that art form is at once an indictment of our forefathers and a tribute to the courage and determination of those who made the best of it. Above all, stand Shelley and Marsh. Strange, a careful historian, offers detailed portraits of both that are lively and sympathetic, but not uncritical. He writes clearly and has many a vivid phrase — Shelley as 'not a man but a multitude'; Annie Clifford as 'the student flat queen'; Gregory Kane (who cannot be reduced to a mere quotation); and John Pocock's dismissal of a New Zealand play as if 'Noel Coward's mother had been frightened by Eugene O'Neill'.

Strange's book has numerous evocative photographs and sketches of people, productions and programmes (a few in colour), lists of every play put on, a short bibliography and a good index. Perhaps a more accurate sub-title would be 'the gallant quest for a national theatre, act one': Strange, in my opinion, is ideally qualified to carry the story on, beyond 1953, in one or two more volumes.

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