

Reviews

Looking for the Phoenix: A Memoir. By W.H. Oliver. Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 2002. 178 pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 1-877242-98-5.

THOSE WHO BELIEVE in ‘definitive history’ or ‘the verdict of history’ will find this a frustrating book. Oliver has not found his Phoenix: he is still looking. He records a vice-chancellor asking him what is the purpose and use of history. He does not reveal his answer. Instead, a lifetime’s research and reflection produces only continuing uncertainty.

The early chapters of the book are mostly about his parents. Cornish Methodists, his father and mother migrated to New Zealand in search of a better life. His father, a farm labourer, was later to return to the horrors of Gallipoli and the Western Front. Whatever effects this had on him he remained a sturdy optimist: a local preacher and stalwart of the Labour party, a candidate for parliament. Oliver writes of both his parents with affection; but it is clear his father influenced him profoundly.

As Oliver describes it, the formative influences of his childhood were not the ‘frontier’ environment of Feilding and Dannevirke; nor does any theory of Maori/Pakeha ‘bi-culturalism’ fit his description of his early life. If there was a bi-culturalism it was that of migrants, still mentally part of the homeland left behind them while adapting to the world of the settler. Maori history was ‘the history we did not know’ (p.54).

All of these influences were at work in 1960 when Oliver wrote *The Story of New Zealand*, his first foray into New Zealand history. It was a brief introductory survey and it has usually been contrasted with Keith Sinclair’s short history that had appeared the year before. Sinclair is seen as stressing the importance of the new environment, Oliver as stressing the continuity of inherited traditions.

But Oliver’s position was more complicated than that. In his youth he had absorbed the idealized Cornwall of his parents. Then he had spent some years studying for his doctorate at Oxford. The experience could have turned him into yet another anglicized kiwi: but Oxford in those days was far removed from Cornwall, let alone far flung Manawatu. It had yet to learn how to cope with graduate students from overseas. So Oliver refers to Balliol’s ‘crowd of brattish ex-schoolboys’ (p.86) and ‘sweaty youths coming in from football to have their teas’ (p.88). The English, in short, were ‘disagreeable’; he was unprepared for ‘the carefully nuanced distancing techniques with which the English regulated their social relationships’ (p.89). It was impossible for him to adopt a veneer of Englishness. Yet half a century on he sees danger in ‘opting out of the European inheritance into a dubious quasi-indigenoussness’. He concludes that ‘a kind of ambidexterity is best’ (p.89).

In the years ahead he continued ‘finding a country by thinking about it’ (p.108). This however was a difficult process as the context in which such thinking went on constantly changed. In his childhood he found himself standing on a platform reciting ‘what can a little chap do/For his country and for you?’ (p.13). Now he asks ‘Who, today, would seek to celebrate the virtues of British settlement? Or be reminded, as I was as a child, of the glories of imperialism on Empire Day? The luckless fate of Waitangi Day must surely serve as a warning . . .’ (p.172).

Oliver’s career as a historian coincided with a rising tide of Maori influence, and an increasing acceptance of feminist perspectives. In his historical writing — and in his role as Professor of History at Massey University — Oliver was particularly receptive to feminist thought. The two big historical projects he presided over — the *Oxford History*

of *New Zealand* and the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* — would surely have been impossible without the contribution of women. *The Story of New Zealand*, which had no index entry under ‘women’ (p.131) began to look very much a period piece.

Maori perspectives at first presented more of a problem. When organizing the *Oxford History* Oliver was assured that there were no Maori historians available to participate; but by the time of the *DNZB* there was a much greater Maori involvement. When he retired in 1990 he began an involvement with the Waitangi Tribunal that he calls ‘lengthy and ambiguous’ (p.155). For the most part the chapter makes sad reading. In this account the Tribunal appears as a place where lawyers flourish and the past is politicized — ‘not academic history at all but a history shaped by current political aspirations . . .’ (p.168).

There is a note of defeat in all this. A career full of achievement would indeed have reached a climax if he could have conveyed the insights of the academic historians to those who are actively seeking to improve our future by repairing our past. But there appears to have been only a partial meeting of minds. He describes his approach as an ‘uneasy combination of an ingrained radicalism tempered by conservative caution’ (p.176). Such ambiguous ambidexterity would have been too complicated for those who see history as simply a political tool.

He places the blame on his former colleagues:

Given that the claims process has such an interesting and paradoxical historical context, it is surprising that few academic historians pay any attention to it. Those in university history departments who have participated can be numbered on the fingers of one hand. The *New Zealand Journal of History* has given it scant attention; Tribunal reports are massively historical but the *Journal* has reviewed only one of them. The legalistic demand for simple (and often simple-minded) answers has been too little tempered by academic caution and balance. It is both remarkable and serious that there has been very little public academic discussion of the Tribunal’s historical analysis (p.167).

In his final chapter, Oliver takes a swipe at ‘heritage’, which he calls ‘history’s shifty cousin’ (p.172). The business of history, he argues, is not to celebrate the treasures of the past but to scrutinize inherited pieties. But all pieties, orthodoxies and programmes, including his own, are ‘open to question’ (pp.172–3). In his lifetime he has been a Methodist, an Anglican and a Roman Catholic. Now he thinks that ‘while it is not helpful to think of something or somebody “out there”, I had better think more attentively about the likelihood that there is an “in here” which I have neglected’ (p.178).

Uncertainty has not brought despair: Oliver can report a greater happiness in his personal life; and when he looks back, ‘twentieth century New Zealand was a good place for the son of an immigrant farm labourer’ (p.178).

JOHN OWENS

Devonport

The Merchant of the Zeehaen: Isaac Gilsemans and the Voyages of Abel Tasman. By Grahame Anderson. Te Papa Press in association with the Royal Netherlands Embassy and the New Zealand-Netherlands Foundation (Inc), Wellington, 2001. 162 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN 0-909010-75-7.

THIS BOOK GREW out of Grahame Anderson’s attempts to identify the artist of a coastal view in the journal of Abel Tasman’s voyage of 1642–43. The drawing showed the *Heemskerck* and *Zeehaen* anchored off a strangely curved perspective of an unidentified stretch of coast generally thought to be somewhere near D’Urville Island. In the summer of 1984–85 Anderson and a yachting friend sailed in search of the anchorage and found