

Tomorrow Comes the Song: A Life of Peter Fraser. By Michael Bassett with Michael King. Penguin Books, Auckland, 2000. 445 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN 0-14-029793-6.

MICHAEL BASSETT was one of New Zealand's leading historians long before he was elected to Parliament and became a minister in the Fourth Labour Government. Since leaving the House he has returned to historical writing and has demonstrated a remarkable productivity, particularly in political biography. More than 60 pages of endnotes, referring to a wide range of archival, newspaper, published and oral sources, show how he has retained an appetite for careful research. From those notes it is also clear that Michael King made an invaluable contribution to this work in carrying out in the late 1970s and early 1980s many interviews with people who had been acquainted with Fraser. Added to the interviews undertaken by Bassett himself, these constitute a rich resource for historians of New Zealand politics. As historian and politician, Bassett has also demonstrated the ability to turn a telling phrase. Here the latter include the remarks that Fraser's 'only indulgence was self-improvement' (p.78) and 'While the sun was setting on the British Empire, New Zealanders revelled in the twilight' (p.324). Bassett has used the statement that partisan conflict during the First World War 'sounded more and more like flatulence in church' (p.66) in an earlier book, but it retains its effectiveness.

However, an unfortunate legacy of the main author's stint in government is an irritating tendency to make asides justifying the policies he supported in the 1980s and now supports as a sympathiser with the Association of Consumers and Taxpayers. For example, Bassett is right to point out the emphasis Fraser and his fellow Labour politicians placed on work for pay, on their frequently colourful rejection of 'the ingrained, degenerate loafer' (p.299). But the rejection of that folk demon has to be placed in the context of a system of award wages and a government that would have considered an unemployment rate of even 5% a disgrace rather than a corrective mechanism. It is questionable to assert that 'Work as the quid pro quo for reward slowly declined' without noting that reward as a quid pro quo for work has also declined.

Fraser's development from youthful radical to elderly proponent of strict economic and social controls necessitates some explanation and here the book is not strong. On a number of occasions it is claimed rather unconvincingly that Fraser was never actually that radical. Thus his statement in August 1920 that 'the Labour Party was just as extreme as any socialist party, and that in his view capitalism should eventually be replaced by a communist system "with as little friction as possible"' (p.98), is rapidly followed by an assurance that 'he was actually pointing the Labour Party in the opposite direction to the path being taken by Lenin and Trotsky' (p.99). On p.346 the Fraser of 1950 is permitted to imply that he has never favoured 'class warfare'. Yet on p.90 the Fraser of 1919 declared to the Labour Party Conference that '... they had a choice between armed or passive resistance to the enemies of the working class. For his part, he favoured armed resistance ...'.

Fraser's consistency lay to a large extent in his authoritarianism and his egalitarianism rather than an instinctive moderation. He had little patience with his opponents as long as they opposed him. He tended to forgive them once they came over to his side or were safely dead. It was typical of Fraser to rule from the chair in 1940 that the leadership ballot in which he was a candidate should be decided by a show of hands rather than a secret ballot (p.185). While the ability and industry of his ally Fintan Patrick Walsh is properly recognized here, that man's capacity for ferocious bullying could be reiterated a bit more strongly. Reflecting on Fraser's reliance on men like Walsh and 'Big Jim' Roberts, Bassett dismisses too lightly any charge of authoritarianism against the Prime Minister (p.157). Similarly, the line between loyalty to old and trusted friends and cronyism is sometimes so narrow as to be imperceptible. It would also be useful to hear more about the 'boldness in the defence of individual artistic expression' of this

generally puritanical character. Interviews that Michael King carried out with Martyn Finlay and a number of younger Labourites provide some welcome balance to the affectionate recollections of Alistair McIntosh and the early staff of External Affairs. On the other hand, those recollections bring out well Fraser's enormous drive to succeed, not least against his own physical limitations, overcoming very poor eyesight and doggedly working on through the 1940s despite repeated painful and debilitating infections. With no personal interest in wealth or luxury, he had small sympathy for those who coveted them. He was well aware that the maintenance of the egalitarian society he favoured required firm state controls to keep the covetous, whether watersiders or company directors, from exploiting their advantages. If he had little time for 'snake-oil salesmen such as the communists and social creditors' (p.119), he had even less for those selling 'the free market'.

On the whole, this is a welcome contribution to New Zealand's political historiography. Fraser's contribution to Labour's rise to power, his wartime leadership, his determination to resist the demands of the greedy and his success in winning respect for this country internationally are all well covered. Conversely Michael Bassett is too committed an historian not to paint a portrait 'warts and all', even if one might have to look carefully at times to see them.

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A Distant Shore: Irish Migration and New Zealand Settlement. Edited by Lyndon Fraser. University of Otago Press, Dunedin, 2000. 196 pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 1-877-13397-3.

IT IS DANGEROUS to rely on last lines as a sign of a book's content, but in *A Distant Shore* the last line is almost irresistible. '100 years after the Hibernian Society's birth is was clearly no longer important to be Irish.' It is always difficult for a collection of essays to work out a common theme and this book provides two interesting but ultimately contradictory approaches to the idea of Irish history in New Zealand.

The opening two chapters by Donald Harman Akenson and Patrick O'Farrell are think pieces on the nature of Irish history. They provide a platform for re-thinking the nature of Irishness in a study of New Zealand society and beyond. They argue that the Irish diaspora is complex and old stereotypes need to be avoided. It is necessary to demonstrate, for instance, the extent to which Irish migrants contributed to the growth of empire and not just formed pockets of resistance against it, to look at the nature of the expansion of Ireland alongside that of the diaspora of Spanish and African peoples and to look at the interaction between the two.

Both Akenson and O'Farrell try to avoid the assumption that the further migrants went from Claire or Limerick and the more that they became enmeshed in Greymouth or Dargaville, the less they could be tested against the norms of being Irish. Akenson rather unnecessarily questions New Zealand historiography's emphasis on bi-culturalism, suggesting it sidelines the multitude of experiences of different waves of European migrants, and in particular those from the four nations of the British Isles.

If these two chapters set a framework for looking at the Irish experience, it is a framework the rest of the book largely ignores. Alasdair Galbraith comes closest with his examination of the importance of Protestant Irish in the development of New Zealand society. Galbraith shows how nineteenth-century Protestant immigrants were substantially favoured in migratory schemes and how strongly they contributed to New Zealand politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The central theme