

The Rural Entrepreneurs: A History of the Stock and Station Agent Industry in Australia and New Zealand. By Simon Ville. Cambridge University Press, Oakleigh, Victoria, 2000. 259 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN 0-521-64265-5.

WHEN I FIRST STARTED OUT researching the origins of the New Zealand Farmers' Union more years ago than I care to remember, that most supportive of librarians, Jim Traue, called me into his office at the Alexander Turnbull Library. He wanted to check his hunch that the bulky Stock and Station Agency records he had been collecting would prove invaluable for writing the history of New Zealand farming. My enthusiastic confirmation of one of his many perceptive intuitions helped convince him to collect even more material.

Unfortunately no one since has made much use of these excellent sets of records, whether at the Turnbull, the Hocken, Canterbury Museum or Fletcher Challenge Archives. I was delighted, therefore, to discover that an Australian economic historian, Simon Ville, has finally started to analyse the operation of a uniquely Australasian institution.

As Jim Gardner pointed out in the first edition of the *Oxford History of New Zealand* the stock and station agency differed from any British or new world equivalents in that it supplied credit as well as supplies and services to farmers. So the stock and station agency represented a kind of super, one-stop shop, which helped its clients raise mortgages while supplying them with equipment, seeds and stock. Agencies also acted as intermediaries between farmers on the one hand and banks, ship owners, insurers, wool buyers and freezing companies on the other. The Agency's other main task was transporting and selling wool and, to a much lesser extent, grain. (The success of co-operatives amongst dairy farmers and the small scale of these farming operations meant that stock and station agencies had little to do with milk, butter and cheese. The agencies also generally left British operated freezing companies such as Borthwicks, or locally run farmer co-operatives, to handle the movement and slaughter of stock for the frozen meat industry.)

Ville shows that this particular institution originated with the rapid growth of the pastoral industry in Australia during the 1830s and 1840s. As the Australian industry extended its frontiers to New Zealand, firms such as Wright Stephenson were established in the 1860s to service the rapid growth of South Island pastoral farming. The Australian giant Dalgety also expanded its operations into New Zealand in that decade. So called 'Anglos' run by London based directors like the National Mortgage Association, joined the competition from the 1870s.

Ville argues, with the assistance of numerous graphs, tables and diagrams, that despite the volatility of the international wool market, the agencies helped the majority of their farmer clients cope with the difficulties of selling to far-flung and fickle international markets. Remarkably, he also argues, despite much popular mythology to the contrary, these large organizations co-operated in sensible ways rather than competing irresponsibly by cutting servicing costs to unsustainable low levels. Naturally farmers resented firm control during difficult times like the depressions of the 1880s and 1890s and the Australian ecological crisis of the 1890s (when pushing beyond sustainable farming limits reduced the Australian sheep flock by half). Similarly most agencies also succeeded in stopping farmers becoming recklessly extravagant in boom times such as the early 1950s. Despite mergers into giant organizations with the capacity to act as ruthless oligopolies Ville maintains that the relatively small number of surviving firms (in Australia, Elder Smith Goldsborough Mort, 1963, and Victorian Producers' Co-operative and Primac, 1998; and in New Zealand, Dalgety Crown, 1983, and Wrightson, 1993) continue to provide sound market and technical advice to clients and only underwrite properly costed expansion, or diversification programmes.

Not everyone will agree with this optimistic reading but Ville must be congratulated on producing a book on economic history that can be read and understood

by the non-specialist. He writes clearly and the various visual aids are most helpful. Nevertheless, I have two major problems, neither of which can be laid at the feet of a thoroughly competent and highly professional economic historian.

First, this is hopefully the beginning of further investigation because it tells a story of large firms from the top down. We now desperately need a 'farm up' study, as it were, to learn better how the policies of these large organizations both assisted and hindered farmers. Mythology suggests that farmers resented the strict controls of the stock and station agency in hard times but, on balance, held a favourable opinion of their agent. Common wisdom also has it that the agencies saved many farmers from bankruptcy in times of boom and bust. Locally controlled link operations of this kind which were sympathetic to farmers' needs may have been a factor in the absence of militant farmers' movement in Australasia, such as the American populist crusade of the late nineteenth century, or the Co-operative Commonwealth Association of Saskatchewan which emerged in inter-war Canada. This is especially true in New Zealand where the Country Party of the 1920s struggled to gain a constituency, unlike its Australian counterparts. Farmers everywhere directed hostile rhetoric at exploitative and untrustworthy middlemen but when those middlemen acted sympathetically towards such complaint they removed much heat from the attacks of would-be firebrands. Stereotyping became even more difficult when the local stock and station agent became a trusted advisor and virtual member of the family. These impressions need to be checked at both the local and sector level. Careful farm-by-farm analysis would also show how farmers modified development according to the constraints imposed and advice offered by the agencies. Naturally Ville had to first write the institutional history of these firms but someone now needs to investigate the responses of clients to their many faceted activities.

Second, perhaps the time has come for economic history to broaden its range. This is a fine example of the genre but it will hold very little appeal outside the shrinking number of economic history departments and, perhaps, the rural sector. Anyone who has taught courses in general history, including that of New Zealand, knows how students' eyes cloud over at the mere mention of economics. Where in this tale of financing, transporting, supplying and mergers are the big dynamics of race, gender and class? Yet if such material is broadened to include the social, cultural and intellectual/ideological elements of the story and the environmental impacts of economic decisions and practices, students' eyes brighten and the relieved teacher engages with his/her class once more. The current unpopularity of economic history which is decimating specialist departments throughout the English-speaking world is unfortunate at best, perhaps even disastrous, because economics is fundamental to understanding our past. Hard economic structures and processes dictate most aspects of our daily lives whatever some postmodernists may argue to the contrary. If only a tiny remnant of economic history is left who will query the excesses of whatever economic policies happen to be fashionable by pointing out that such things have been tried unsuccessfully before? Surely the time has come to put our discipline back together again instead of persisting with silly divisions that ruptured history in the academy in the 1970s?

A good way to start would be to study of the role played by stock and station agencies in the life of rural communities. Hopefully Simon Ville's excellent 'business' history will stimulate someone (or better still a team including a sociologist, geographer, anthropologist and historian) to investigate the complex relationship of farmers, agents and firms. Such a project will reveal much about the dynamics of farming in Australia and New Zealand and highlight what is distinctive and what is different about the rural sectors of these two societies.

TOM BROOKING

University of Otago