

Friend of China — The Myth of Rewi Alley. By Anne-Marie Brady. Routledge Curzon, London, 2003. 210 pp. NZ price: \$102.95. ISBN 0-700-71493-6.

DR BRADY'S BOOK is a bold 'exercise in historical revisionism' (p.6) and is intended to be 'not primarily a biography' (p.5) of 'one of the most famous foreigners to live and work in China' (p.6), who was 'indeed a New Zealand "hero"' (p.175). Fascinating though the book is, the readers of this journal should be made aware of the scale of the case, or perhaps one should say the myth of the myth. Alley's name and even the Industrial Cooperative movement of the 1940s so closely tied to his name are nowhere to be found in the largest contemporary foreign history of China, the multi-volume *Cambridge History of China*, while our latest national history by James Belich also fails to note his existence. So here was a man well known in humanitarian circles in 1940s New Zealand, worshipped at the heart of the New Zealand China Friendship Society since the mid-1950s and much documented as both a threat and an asset in the archives of a government which spent two decades dreading Chinese communism and then three more seeking to expand relations with communist China. To any New Zealander interested in China, the importance of Alley is self-evident and even axiomatic, but did he have a more than sectional and parochial profile after the 1940s? In 1937–1941, efforts by the American journalist Edgar Snow and others certainly raised international awareness of Alley and asserted the decisive role of Industrial Cooperatives in the survival of Chinese resistance, but Alley's dismissal from 'all positions of influence in the cooperative movement' (p.37) in 1942 and the deteriorating reputation of the cooperatives in the rest of the 1940s robbed him of the possibility of sustained international fame. Even within the People's Republic, Victor Wilcox, chairman of the New Zealand Communist Party, received far wider publicity than Alley up until the 1980s (p.129), despite Alley's faithful support for the Chinese Communist Party.

Nevertheless the study of the life of Alley retains a clear interest for New Zealanders and, through Dr Brady's analysis, a wider value for students of China. Rewi Alley (1897–1987) has already been the subject of two biographies (by Willis Airey in 1970 and Geoff Chapple in 1980) and a ghost-written autobiography in 1987, each of which is 'useful in different ways, but deeply flawed' (p.5). Even the most cursory reading of Brady would throw up one crucial flaw, the absence of discussion of Alley's homosexuality, which Brady asserts vigorously as a reason both for his interest in China before his arrival there in 1927 (pp.12–13) and for his appreciation of China before 1949 (pp.18, 44 *inter alia*). Yet Brady is mostly measured in her assessment, in particular rejecting any suggestion of paedophilia, although she sometimes adds titillating detail for no purpose, for example in a page about Peking gays at a time when Alley was not living there (pp.20–1). Brady's account fits the evidence and even mainstream New Zealand has recently granted, in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Volume 4* (1998) which she does not cite, that 'Alley was almost certainly homosexual'.

Yet equally important for understanding Alley's life is Brady's realization that Alley chose to stay in China after 1949 on personal grounds, not ideological nor humanitarian ones, and that this decision necessitated doing 'anything that was required to stay on' (p.48). This included suppressing his overt sexuality, silencing his critical voice and undertaking whatever tasks were necessary to be a 'friend of China' (ch.7) and ultimately an 'internationalist' under its Chinese definition (pp.153–4). As a result Alley gained a higher standard of living than most in China and survived the Cultural Revolution largely unscathed, but Brady clearly illustrates, through a close reading of his correspondence, that he felt unfulfilled and often very lonely, both detached from his Chinese 'family' of adopted sons and from his New Zealand family. Ironically the last ten years of Alley's life brought little improvement, because, although he was lionized by senior party leaders and visited by many foreign delegations, he privately perceived

the Chinese turning their back on the ideals of co-operation and collectivism which had inspired him earlier. Thus Alley paid the price at the personal level for his 'Faustian choice' (p.48) to stay on in China, as did all other 'foreign friends' whom his life parallels.

The sources for Brady's study are wide ranging and she has used them with considerable care, as for example in her investigation of the drafts and notes of Airey's biography. Alley was a copious letter writer and despite his request to burn all his letters in New Zealand in 1968, Brady has been able to draw on public and private collections of papers to illustrate many aspects of his life through his correspondence. Archival research in Wellington and Washington has provided an official viewpoint on this 'extra-ordinary, ordinary New Zealander' (p.174), while Brady's interviews have ranged across Alley's family, friends and colleagues, with Courtney Archer, Alley's co-worker at the Shandan Bailie School 1946–52, as the most revelatory, especially on the sexuality issue. The book is enhanced by several photographs and by a list of the honours received by Alley, but sadly is ill served by a limited index.

In sum this is a book which will infuriate those older New Zealanders for whom Rewi Alley represents an unchallengeable icon, but for most of us Brady has provided a sympathetic portrayal of a human being, who, faced with a crucial decision in later middle age, opted to stay in a foreign land which he loved, even as it was transformed in ways that ultimately robbed him of all independence. Perhaps Alley's life can now be read as a small-scale personal tragedy, rather than as any kind of heroic myth.

RICHARD T. PHILLIPS

The University of Auckland

A History of the Churches in Australasia. By Ian Breward. (Oxford History of the Christian Church, Henry and Owen Chadwick) Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2001. 474 pp. UK price: £65.00. ISBN 0-19-826356-2.

THERE HAS NEVER up to now been an academic history of the churches of New Zealand. Several such works exist for Australia and for the Pacific. It is thus quite remarkable to have a text that will serve as a very fine introduction to Christianity in this country, set in the context of a history of the whole of the South Pacific.

A book of such scope is relatively unusual at a time when national histories seem to predominate. The book bears comparison with the pioneering work by Donald Denoon and Philippa Mein-Smith in Blackwell's general history series. How do the two compare? This work is certainly dramatically more expensive (albeit in hardback) and as a text it certainly feels less innovative. On the other hand it appears to integrate the Pacific islands story much more successfully, perhaps because constant comparisons were being made between the different missions from the time of their commencement.

At another level, this is a work of staggering detail compared to Denoon and Mein-Smith's work. One constantly feels up close to the texture of the religious communities, with details provided of tiny congregations and an enormous range of denominations. Considering that the story really has not been much told in the past, one can see that Breward's self-conceived role is to shape the texture of his interpretation from the stories of the community, certainly with something of an eye to the quirky and colourful. Overall this is an account which finds its meaning substantially in biographical accounts and in institutional change. Again this is in substantial contrast to Denoon and Mein-Smith, but perhaps their broad strands of social and cultural interpretation are only possible after a Breward has done the detailed work. This is not to suggest that Breward does not provide a broad social and cultural interpretation. He does, although he follows a rather familiar sequence. The most interesting aspect (at least to this reviewer) was the