

Thoroughbreds, Trainers, Toffs and Tic Tac Men: A Cartoon History of Horse Racing in New Zealand. By David Grant. Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 2001. 159 pp. NZ price: \$34.95. ISBN 0-86469-399-0.

HORSE RACING and its attendant milieu have been present within New Zealand since at least 1835 — significantly longer than rugby, although much later than beer. Yet, without the efforts of David Grant and one recent thesis writer,¹ we would know almost nothing of its enduring popularity and cultural prominence, economic importance and highly contested political firmament.

This book, as Grant freely acknowledges, is a bi-product of his earlier *On a Roll: A History of Gambling and Lotteries in New Zealand* (Wellington, 1994) and *Two Over Three on Goodtime Sugar: The New Zealand TAB turns 50* (Wellington, 2000). Research for these works revealed a constant and colourful intersection between horse racing and the almost equally long history of press cartooning in New Zealand. As Grant observes, ‘Cartoons provide an immediacy to a moment or an event, interpreting its passion or mood. While they are often parochial, narrowly-focused and conservative, reflecting editorial wishes, cartoons elucidate the “other” history: the story from “down on the ground”, a portrayal of a point in time to which “ordinary folk” can react’ (p.8). While almost all New Zealand cartoonists covered aspects of horse racing, four feature prominently in this book — William ‘Blo’ Bloomfield from the 1880s to the 1930s; his brother John for a shorter period during the early twentieth century; Neville Lodge for four decades after World War Two and his successor, Daryl Crimp, during the 1990s. Inevitably this is also a parade of changing styles — from the density and detail of the early illustrated press to the less complex and perhaps less subtle line drawings of recent times.

Although there is a historical overview of the growth, formalization and regulation of racing and explanatory context for each chapter and individual cartoon, the book is essentially a set of thematic ‘snap shots’ arranged in broadly chronological order. The early chapters dealing with horse racing as carnival, the rise and demise of bookies and ‘Horse Racing and God’ address the longstanding tension between popular recreation and its close association with gambling and successive generations of moralists who railed against supposed corruption and social corrosion. Other chapters touch on the complex internal politics and challenges within the racing industry: the bitter 1920 jockeys’ strike, sexism and the fight for recognition by women jockeys, doping and the need to adapt to a more competitive, liberalized leisure and gambling environment during the last two decades. Other cartoons and chapters focus on some of the personalities of the racing industry, from Sir George Clifford, the autocratic president of the New Zealand Racing Conference whose encouragement for thoroughbred racing was equally matched by his neglect of the working conditions of jockeys, to Christian Cullen and Michael Walker — the latest four-legged and two-legged ‘idols’ of the track.

While cartoonists are willing enough to illustrate the frequent hypocrisy of racing administrators and their opponents, there is equal evidence of a conservative and sometimes decidedly reactionary streak indicative of the editors who published their work. Implicit is another corrective to those historians who deal in bland depictions of New Zealand as an egalitarian sporting paradise. Given the genesis of this book, the scope of the sources and the intended market, it is certainly not a comprehensive social history of horse racing in New Zealand. Nor will this reviewer chastise the author for failing to produce such a book — although his previous work suggests that he is perhaps best qualified to do so. Rather, this is a well presented and accessible

compilation, both humorous and thought-provoking, of themes from the long and diverse history of an activity that embodies much more than the simple designation of 'sport'.

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1 Carolyn J. Mincham, 'Horseracing in the New Zealand Colonial Community, 1841–1911', MA thesis, Massey University (Albany), 2001.