

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> *Ballantynes, The Story of Dunstable House 1854–2004*, Christchurch, 2004; *The Ironmasters: The First One Hundred Years of H.E. Shacklock Limited*, Dunedin, 1973; *A Hundred Million Trees: The Story of New Zealand Forest Products Limited*, Auckland, 1982.

*Harold Wellman — A Man Who Moved New Zealand*. By Simon Nathan. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2005. 272 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN 0-86473-506-5.

I DIVED INTO THE FIRST CHAPTER WITH GREAT ANTICIPATION. Here was the biography of a controversial man that everyone in New Zealand earth sciences, and a good number of others, had encountered. By the end of the first page I was baffled — it seemed to be written in the first person. Recourse to the introduction revealed that Harold Wellman had started to write his memoirs in his late eighties and produced a voluminous but incomplete account not suitable for publication. Simon Nathan had decided to let Harold speak for himself as much as possible. The first five chapters (57 pages) comprise a much reduced and cleverly edited version of Wellman's own account of his early days (1909–1939), and conveys very well Harold's direct style and abrupt delivery. I could almost hear him talking. It was a wise decision that makes the rest of the book more easily understood.

The Wellmans came to New Zealand in 1927 when Harold's father obtained a temporary commission at the Devonport Naval Base. His father had intended a naval career for Harold, but instead he 'managed' to get himself articled as a surveying cadet. Though he proved himself very adept and passed the final examination, this did not save him from the impact of the depression. The book gives a clear picture of the awful problems faced by young skilled people without work. The account of his life as a prospector and gold miner is told in a succinct, unsentimental way that well illustrates the problems of a life with little money or resources, and provides a useful window on conditions at the time.

Wellman's qualification as a surveyor and his experience with the practical side of finding gold were enough for him to get a job as a 'temporary geophysicist' with the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) in 1935. Here his talents were soon recognized and he was encouraged to study part-time for a BSc at Canterbury University College and subsequently, over several years, an MSc at Victoria University. As economic conditions improved he was offered a permanent position with the DSIR but at a salary much less than the prevailing rates for surveyors. He decided to leave the DSIR, but Ernest Marsden persuaded him to take a year's leave and work abroad to earn more money, and to see if salary problems could be resolved when he returned.

The year 1938, spent with Shell Oil Company in Papua, provides an interesting contrast between Wellman's easy relationship with native workers and the separatist philosophy of the Australian colonial administration. There were also stresses within the company, which had apparently given large donations to Hitler in the hope of protecting the company's property. The time in Papua was not very pleasant, but at least Wellman saved £500, nearly twice what he would have earned (and been forced to spend) in Wellington.

At this point Harold's edited narrative ends and the remainder of the book is written from a variety of sources, though it still employs extensive quotes from Harold, his wife Joan and a range of colleagues. Though the style changes, the book is still highly readable and full of surprises. Wellman rejoined the DSIR in 1939 at a salary of £355, certainly not what he had asked for, but more than he had been previously offered. Key events of the year were his marriage to Joan Butler, the purchase of a Ford V8 and the outbreak of World War II. For most of the next five years Wellman was busy throughout the country undertaking a wide range of strategic and economic mineral surveys and

'secret missions', mainly related to the sites of planned defence facilities. An insight into attitudes of that time, which I cannot resist, is a letter concerning the use of the car on government business: '12 November 1939, I hereby apply for car allowance as I now own a Ford V8 of 30 HP. As I will be using this car on Government business, transporting gelignite from Invercargill to Orepuki, and as the car is not insured when transporting explosives, I suggest that the rate per mile be raised to 1s while carrying explosives, to cover the extra risk.' The director of the Geological Survey at the time supported the granting of the car allowance, but was doubtful about the extra allowance for carrying explosives as it was not covered by the public service manual and might be setting a precedent. No one seems to have thought that cars on government business exploding in the streets of Invercargill might set a precedent too. And how did society survive without OSH?

Over these years Wellman accumulated a vast range of experience in all parts of the country and became 'Mr Fixit' for the Geological Survey. He was given new staff to train as well as all the intractable problems. One of Wellman's strengths was devising systems to organize and collate different types of geological data in such a way that new interpretations could be derived from them — the equivalent to the modern spreadsheet and geographic information system. These data sets permitted Wellman to advance new theories, often considered contentious or outrageous by his contemporaries. Although not always right, topics that were forever changed by Wellman's touch included the controls on coal rank variation, subdivision of the South Island by the Alpine Fault with a displacement of 480 km, the relatively young age of this displacement, resolution of the relative age of the Permian and Mesozoic rocks of Southland and Nelson and the greywackes of the Southern Alps, the subdivision of New Zealand Cretaceous rocks and the study of active faults, growing folds and earthquakes.

Although he was a leading figure in the Geological Survey, Wellman was, neither by personality nor inclination, a manager and had avoided any such role. The exact circumstances of his resignation from the Geological Survey are not known, though perhaps being sent on a management course tipped the scale. In 1956 he left to join BP. This appears to have been a frying-pan to fire move, and despite the extra income Wellman could not fit into the BP management culture. By 1958 he was back in Wellington on the staff of the Geology Department at Victoria University, where he remained until his final retirement in 1979. He remained active throughout his retirement.

This biography presents a fair picture of an exceptional man. He was very clever and could see clearly to the core of a problem. He could develop theories from a relatively small data base and was correct, or so close to correct, that he was a generation ahead of the game. He presented his ideas clearly (if you could keep up) and forcefully. But he could be forceful to the point of being abrasive and rude. He was egalitarian but did not suffer fools gladly. He was a lifetime smoker, drank, sometimes to excess, and lived on a dreadful diet for long periods while in the field. Nonetheless he was fit and healthy and saw his ninetieth birthday!

All this and more comes through in the book which reports the good and the bad sides of Harold Wellman. It well records the life of an unusual, gifted and significant New Zealander and the times he lived in. It is a valuable contribution to New Zealand history and an excellent read.

JOHN BRADSHAW

*University of Canterbury*