

Reviews (Books)

The New Zealand Family from 1840: A Demographic History. By Ian Pool, Arunachalam Dharmalingam and Janet Sceats. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2007. xviii, 454pp. NZ price: \$50.00. ISBN 978-1-86940-357-7.

THIS IS A LARGE AND AT TIMES DIFFICULT BOOK, but historians will neglect it at their peril. In many European intellectual traditions demography is as central to social history as it once was to human geography in this country. Without the University of Waikato's Centre for Population Studies, founded by Ian Pool, the discipline would be virtually dead in this country. Although few historians in this country will be familiar with the terminology, let alone the more complex statistical techniques, the main structure of this history of the family in New Zealand from 1840 onwards is clear enough: the authors identify and discuss the key trends in the four major periods they use, then provide a chapter in which they attempt to explain those trends, before writing an overview in which they analyse the policy implications of their work. One of the book's strengths is the way in which the authors constantly relate their conclusions to what was happening in other countries of both the Western Developed World (WDC) and the English Speaking World (ESW).

Historians are familiar with the broad patterns outlined in *The New Zealand Family from 1840* — colonial 'baby boom' (1840–mid-1870s), declining fertility (late 1870s–1939), post-war 'baby boom' (1943–1975), 'fertility bust' (1975–1990s), and the current situation where fertility hovers around the level required for population replacement, but the trends indicate that we may be heading for what demographers call a 'fertility trap'.

With the exception of David Thomson's recent essay in *Disputed Histories*,¹ most scholars who have looked at the evidence have concluded that colonial fertility rates were substantially higher than those in Britain. The best study, Raewyn Dalziel's analysis of fertility in early Taranaki, has not been published, but Miriam Vosburgh's major study of *The New Zealand Family: A Trend Analysis* (1978), based on a substantial sample, demonstrated very high rates of fertility at the end of the colonial period in order to identify and explain the remarkable drop in fertility between women who first married in 1880 and those who first married in 1920. Pool and his co-authors provide the fullest account of colonial 'hyper-fertility', close to the biological maximum, and systematically dismantle Thomson's argument in reviewing various possible explanations. Almost all women married and a high proportion married young. They draw extensively on work on fertility in Britain's diverse regions to establish this 'baby boom' as unique, but ignore the influence of the systematic colonizers.²

The fertility decline that began in the late 1870s and continued until the end of the so-called Great Depression is well known. As Vosburgh recognized, this drop coincided almost exactly with similar trends in all the ESWs and WDCs, and the authors devote considerable attention to locate New Zealand within this mega-trend. Although they show that more and more women married later, and proportionately fewer married before the age of 21, they argue that increased celibacy among women was the major reason for the fall in fertility and that those women who married continued to have large families. They refer to this process as 'reproductive polarisation'. Their argument directly contradicts Vosburgh's, for she found that the women comprising the marriage cohort of 1920 had not only reduced their fertility but in order to ensure that infertile couples did not bedevil her analysis, an issue totally ignored by Pool's team, Vosburgh took a sub-sample of women who had one child and confirmed the dramatic drop in fertility and family size. Despite my scepticism about 'reproductive polarisation', and a mild regret that they did not build on Vosburgh's analysis of class in explaining the fall in fertility in this period,

their analyses are enhanced by their thorough attention to such matters as abortion, contraception and illegitimacy.

The post-World War II 'baby boom' repeated many characteristics of the colonial 'baby boom', although fertility rates were never comparable. Once again their detailed analysis of the trends, not only in fertility but related phenomena such as illegitimacy, greatly enriches our knowledge. As Māori urbanized they also enter the analyses fully, maintaining a higher fertility rate than Pakeha, but not by much. Both peoples bred at a higher rate than the citizens of WDCs or even ESWs, and continued to do so for longer. As in the colonial period nuptiality determined fertility: almost all women married and a high proportion married young. Indeed, the proportion of teenagers having babies peaked in 1971. The authors argue that the increasing availability of the contraceptive pill, especially for single women, helped usher in a dramatic fall in fertility rates in the 1970s, a fall that has lasted into the twenty-first century. In one of the most significant revolutions recorded, fertile women (or couples) could now control when they had their first baby, how long they waited until conceiving their second (and subsequent ones), and the number of children they had. Fewer women married, more and more delayed starting a family, and for the first time in this history the forms of family changed more than the structure. This book strongly confirms my own prophesy of 1978, that it no longer made sense to talk of the New Zealand family in the singular, for it was taking on a variety of forms.³

Much of the authors' discussion of the period since the 1970s is taken up with matters of public policy. To justify their historical treatment they claim that a sort of 'folk memory' of earlier fertility regimes continues to shape reproductive behaviours, a justification for historical analysis that readers of this journal will not require. They also posit, and try to establish, a link between public policy and fertility rates during the last 50 years. In particular they traduce the so-called 'neo-Liberals' and their attempts to restructure the economy, the public sector and the welfare state (which they insist has been in sharp decline since Ruth Richardson's 'Mother of all Budgets'). When they place this argument in the international context — as a rule one of the book's strengths — I was far from convinced that any simple link existed between public policy and fertility rates. Demographic trends and events certainly have major policy implications, however, and I was disappointed to learn that Statistics New Zealand has been as cavalier with its demographic taxonomies as it has been with its occupational ones. The number of times Pool's team report that we have inadequate data, or that they must rely on analyses done in other countries which have superior data, culminates with Statistics New Zealand's astonishing decision to redefine how people can define ethnicity. As has happened so many times, no time series is now possible.

This is both an impressive and ambitious book. Although the authors often rely on James Belich's work, they rarely achieve his memorable lucidity, preferring social-science speak. Do not be put off, though, for this will prove to be the definitive study of most topics covered and the best study of New Zealand's various families that we are likely to have for a very long time.

ERIK OLSSSEN

University of Otago

NOTES

1 Tony Ballantyne and Brian Moloughney, eds, *Disputed Histories: Imagining New Zealand's Pasts*, Dunedin, 2006, pp.119–41.

2 R.S. Neale, *Class and Ideology in the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1972, ch.6, remains indispensable.

3 Co-authored by Andrée Lévesque, 'Towards a History of the European Family in New Zealand', in Peggy Koopman-Boyden, ed., *Families in New Zealand Society*, Wellington, 1978, pp.19–20.