

## Judith Binney, 1940–2011

### OBITUARY

The following obituary was adapted from a speech given at the memorial service for Judith Binney held at The University of Auckland, 28 February 2011.

PROFESSOR EMERITUS DAME JUDITH BINNEY died at her home on 16 February 2011 quite suddenly but after a period of some months battling against cancer. This was particularly poignant given her courageous recovery from a horrendous road accident in December 2009.

Judi was a child of The University of Auckland. Her parents, Sydney and Marjorie Musgrove, came to New Zealand from the United Kingdom via Australia, where Judi was born, when ‘Mus’ joined the staff of the university as Professor of English in 1947. Both were deeply involved in the intellectual and social life of the university. Judi took her degrees at Auckland, was a Fowlds Memorial Scholar in 1964 and taught there from 1966 until 2004 when she retired. She was recognized as a Distinguished Alumna in 2007. When Judi joined the university it was a small place and she had friends across the campus, especially in the Department of English and the Elam School of Fine Arts. Sebastian Black from the Department of English became her partner of nearly 40 years.

Judi was one of a cohort of students who in the late 1950s and early 1960s started to take New Zealand history seriously under the instruction of Keith Sinclair, who put forward the idea that New Zealand needed a generation of pedants to research and write its history. Not that Judi was a pedant. Her master’s thesis, on the missionary Thomas Kendall, was published in 1968 as *The Legacy of Guilt*. This book was recognized by aspiring New Zealand historians as groundbreaking work in what was then described as ‘culture contact’ history. The prose was limpid, the analysis brilliant and the footnotes lengthy. Kendall was a missionary who desperately tried to understand Maori religion and in the process had his own religious beliefs sorely tested. Judi tried to understand Kendall, and ‘systems of explanation’, or the cultural meanings embedded in events became an abiding theme of her work. *The Legacy of Guilt* was awarded the F.P. Wilson Prize for historical writing in New Zealand.

Judi was appointed as a lecturer in the Department of History in 1966. It was a stellar group of people — most of them graduates of the department but with significant international experience. They included Keith Sinclair, Keith Sorrenson, Russell Stone, Nicholas Tarling, Michael and Judith Bassett, Jim Holt, and Mike Stenson. Bob Chapman had recently left to start up the Department of Political Studies. They had a sense of mission, were highly politicized, focused on research, and very active in the university and the community. It was the premier department teaching New Zealand history, although this subject was gathering pace at the southern universities. Judi was very much a part of the Department. It attracted good students and had a rich intellectual life. The students’ History Association ran regular well-attended lectures, an annual weekend Reading Party, usually held in the Waitakeres and later at Leigh, and put on a lot of parties. The

rather seedy atmosphere of the old houses in Wynyard Street with their small run-down offices for senior students and junior staff perhaps aided this intellectual liveliness to which Judi was a major contributor. Her office, like all the other offices, was small, and crammed with books and paper on every conceivable surface.

In the 1970s Judi was closely involved in a debate among historians about the motivation of Maori to convert to Christianity, and although one of the protagonists has since said that it was a 'false problem' it was at the time a very real dispute which furnished a great deal of interest and provided the topic for countless student essays and examination questions. It was the sort of controversy that historians love, involving causation, motivation, God and Mammon. Judi was involved in many other debates over the years, perhaps the most important of which concerned who could write what history. Her view was that this debate could never rest on the grounds of religion, race or gender. Instead she said that what mattered was the ability to understand the subject matter and the strength of the ideas developed in the writing. Understanding of the issues and the development of sophisticated ideas from the historical evidence marked all her writing.

In 1979, along with Gillian Chaplin and Craig Wallace, Judi published *Mihaia*, a study of the prophet Rua Kenana and his community at Maungapohatu. This book was conceived by Craig Wallace but it would be fair to say that Gillian and Judith transformed it by undertaking archival research, travelling to the Urewera and meeting with members of Tuhoe and Rua's family, who told them their stories, interviewing members of the police force who had been involved in the 1916 police expedition into the Urewera, and taking further stunning photographs. This book was followed by two others which were described as a trilogy — *Nga Morehu*, published in 1986, the stories of eight Tuhoe women which were told to Judi and Gillian, and *Redemption Songs*, a life of Te Kooti, published in 1995. *Nga Morehu* was a prize winner in the Wattie Book Awards for 1987 and *Redemption Songs* won the Montana Book Supreme Award in 1996. There had been other books along the way — an edition of William Yates's *Account of New Zealand, The People and the Land*, an illustrated history with Judith Bassett and Erik Olssen, and many other essays and journal articles. This body of work won Judi the Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement in Non-Fiction in 2006.

What Judi recognized in a way no other New Zealand historian has done was the power of the oral world, and the ability of photographs to unlock that world. One of her articles was entitled 'Maori Oral Narratives, Pakeha Written Texts: Two Forms of Telling History'. In this she explored the form and purpose of oral history to Maori and reflected on the responsibilities of historians incorporating oral history into written history. Her role was to prompt the flow of words, to listen, record and retell stories in a way that was true to the people to whom they belonged. The task did not stop there, however. The story might stand alone or it might become a part of a bigger story interpreted, shaped and retold by the historian working in a written tradition. It was in finding the bigger stories into which the oral histories fitted that Judith excelled.

In 2009 the Urewera trilogy became a quartet with the publication of another prizewinning book, *Encircled Lands* — a history of Tuhoe from 1820 to 1921, begun in research undertaken for claims before the Waitangi Tribunal. *Encircled*

*Lands* is a narrative of a struggle for survival in the face of a loss of autonomy and broken promises based on detailed archival research, oral history and case studies. This much-acclaimed work, which won the New Zealand Post Supreme Book Award in 2010, demonstrates the depth of knowledge and understanding of Tuhoe history that Judi acquired over many years, the trust that she had built up among Tuhoe and her deep feeling of responsibility to them. That responsibility was discharged by returning her books to the people — they were her gifts back in return for the stories that had been given into her care. For these acts she was given a name by Tuhoe Tomoirangi o te Aroha.

In addition to the prizes and awards for her writing I have already mentioned Judith was the second J.D. Stout Research Fellow at Victoria University in 1985, worked full time in 1991 on *Redemption Songs* on a Foundation for Research, Science and Technology grant and held a James Cook Research Fellowship from 2000 to 2003. She became one of two historians made Fellows of the Royal Society of New Zealand in 1998 and was an inaugural Fellow of the New Zealand Academy of the Humanities in 2007. In 2009 the Polynesian Society presented her with the Elsdon Best Medal. In 1997 she was made a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit and in 2006 a Distinguished Companion.

Judi served on the committee of the Auckland University Press but she was not a fan of bureaucracy; she was the only person I know of who when awarded a personal chair in 1997 had written into her contract that she would never be asked to be Head of Department. However, by 1990 through her books and in her advisory role to various projects she had become the major oral historian in New Zealand. It was natural then when the Australian government presented the New Zealand government with a gift of \$1 million for an oral history trust at the 1990 sesquicentennial that Judi was appointed to chair the Trust, and she did so until 2003. This inaugurated a number of appointments to bodies in Wellington: the Research Advisory Committee of the Crown Forestry Rental Trust in 1995, the Humanities Panel of the Marsden Fund in 1997, the Board of Te Papa in 1999, a Kaitiaki of the Alexander Turnbull Library in 2003, the Board of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust in 2007, Creative New Zealand in 2009. She also acted frequently as an historical consultant on such projects as the opening of the Commonwealth Games in Auckland and on numerous television documentaries, and she gave evidence as an expert witness before the Waitangi Tribunal.

Judi's teaching was not flamboyant; she did not seek disciples. What impressed her students was her knowledge, her understanding of complex situations and systems, her mastery of detail, her commitment and her concentration. Judi taught New Zealand, Pacific and Latin American history. The latter may seem strange but Judi had visited Mexico soon after she completed her MA and continued to visit it, Spain and also Cuba. Her reading of Mexican history yielded valuable comparative insights into indigenous and colonial histories, and some of her former students have gone on to academic careers in this field. This interest in Mexico was very evident in Judi and Sebastian's home, where the mantelpieces, shelves and walls displayed the treasures she had picked up on her travels alongside their wonderful collection of New Zealand art.

She also made a major contribution to the historical community through the *New Zealand Journal of History*. She was an Associate Editor from 1970 to 1986,

its co-editor (with Keith Sorrenson) from 1987 to 1995, and its sole editor from 1996 to 2002. Summarized in that single sentence is an enormous amount of work; dozens of articles and hundreds of reviews went over her desk in those decades, and her razor-sharp eye and talented editing improved every one of them. When she retired the *Journal* brought out a collection of her essays. In this a young scholar, Damon Salesa, who had been taught and profoundly influenced by Judi, reflected on her teaching and writing. What he recalled most powerfully was Judi's intensity, her 'dashing' presence and the stories she used to make her points. Her stories, he recalled, 'changed the way [we] imagined the past, and "made it new"'.<sup>1</sup>

As Damon discerned, above all Judi was a story teller. I have seen conference audiences spellbound by the power of the tales she told and the way she told them. Her last book — *Stories Without End*, published in 2010 — collected her essays together. In the last paragraph of the introduction Judi commented on the way stories, especially those that are transmitted orally, are transformed by the context in which they are related. By putting old stories into new contexts she gave the stories new life, but she did so without losing the meanings the stories had for the people who trusted her with them. She was characteristically pragmatic about the way the stories would continue to evolve: 'when my pen is silent they will continue to change in the oral world'.<sup>2</sup> Her pen, a strangely anachronistic tool, is now silent but her writings will endure.

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#### NOTES

1 Damon Salesa, 'Korero: A Reflection on the Work of Judith Binney', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 38, 2 (2004), p.272.

2 Judith Binney, *Stories Without End: Essays 1975–2010*, Wellington, 2010, p.11.