

## Reviews (Books)

*An Accidental Utopia? Social Mobility and the Foundations of an Egalitarian Society, 1880–1940.* By Erik Olssen, Clyde Griffen and Frank Jones. Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2011. 332 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN: 978-1-877372-64-3.

SOCIAL HISTORIANS IN NEW ZEALAND wrestle with a problem that no other country in the Anglo-world has to face: the state's decision to destroy census enumerators' handbooks — a policy which was continued from the nineteenth century till 1966. Those wishing to model past social structure thus need to find alternative sources. They then have to attempt the monumental task of classifying the resulting data so that it maps on to the type of data available in censuses elsewhere. This is the undertaking which has occupied Erik Olssen, his co-authors and two teams of other researchers for a career-long period of time. The project, named for the Dunedin suburb of Caversham, enjoyed large amounts of funding from Marsden and from the Ministry of Research, Science and Technology (twice) because of its painstaking and revelatory potential.

The datasets which Olssen's team produced as the nerve centre of their project and all subsequent works are a thing of admirable range, depth, accuracy and quality. The technical aspects of data accrual and modelling were fully outlined in an excellent study, Olssen and Maureen Hickey's *Class and Occupation: The New Zealand Reality*. Now, *An Accidental Utopia?* applies those techniques to paint an empirical picture of continuity and change in New Zealand social, economic and cultural life. Drawing upon electoral rolls, marriage registers and street directories, the project entailed the fullest possible analysis of the 7000–25,000 people who, between 1880 and 1940, lived in Dunedin's six southern suburbs. Limitations in the sources were tackled by triangulating one set against others: street directories, for example, provided greater detail on the nature and level of a person's trade or profession than was evident in electoral rolls. An insoluble problem, however, was the absence, from all types of sources, of more than a small minority (10–15%) of women's occupations. The inability fully to assess women's positions in society was made up for by closely analysing female marital mobility through church records.

As a micro-study of a highly urban area, the project runs the risk of generalising from a unique situation. But, by analysing an urban area, the authors are able to set a benchmark for comparison with other New World towns and cities, if not so much with small-town and rural New Zealand. The authors defend the use of case studies by drawing support from British scholars, such as Michael Savage, author of a pioneering case study of nineteenth-century Preston, and Barry Reay, who wrote an outstanding explication of the value of micro-history. To these authors, the case study correctly prefers 'place' over national sampling; deep-mining of local and regional sources allowing a multi-dimensional account to be generated. While some scholars have questioned the relevance of Caversham and connected Dunedin environments, it seems pertinent to assert, first, that the international comparators tend to be town- or city-sized, and second, that since the Dunedin case-study areas were complex, urban-industrial settings, they offer an extremely relevant and interesting context in which to examine the coming together of New Zealand values and Old World considerations of class, status and hierarchy.

Olssen, Griffen and Jones try to explain the context in which the 'New World' was said to provide greater opportunities than the 'Old World'. They test whether, in fact, this was a fairer, flatter, happier society than the one left behind. New Zealanders hold fast to the notion that theirs was an egalitarian society and are justifiably proud that the last great colonial settlement project of British imperialism resulted in a system of social

organisation and of political negotiation which others, including American Progressives and British Liberals, looked to as a model in the early 1900s. Egalitarianism is not by any means entirely a myth (at least not for white, male breadwinners), for New Zealanders were more socially mobile than was the case in either Britain or America. Even in the US, as Stefan Thernstrom and others proved long ago, the American working class tended not to be especially socially mobile. Additionally, New Zealanders were individually wealthier than their British, Australian and US working-class counterparts till probably the 1970s and felt their society was open and accommodating — a place where anyone could realise their dreams.

Curiously, however, New Zealand was not a classless society, nor a society which eschewed class-based politics. Leading scholars such as Bill Oliver and Miles Fairburn have stressed the role of rapid upward mobility in weakening class affinities in New Zealand, but Olssen et al set out to test the notion. At the same time as they describe many features of an egalitarian society (socio-economic mobility, relatively weak residential segregation by class, the absence of cultural or ethnic stratifications within Pākehā society), the authors are also able to show that the old nostrums of class were not entirely redundant. The authors have a central desire to test mobility levels, and, where mobility existed, to explore its effects on the wider culture of those who enjoyed it. American social history and historical sociology (from Stefan Thernstrom onwards) are highly influential on the team here. In the case of the Dunedin southern suburbs, upward mobility did not produce an unthinking classlessness. In fact, local class consciousness fed directly into national debates in the later 1880s and early 1890s, principally through politicians of working-class origins. For there was a correlation between the Dunedin working class and the conciliatory social and economic policies of that age, when unions, masters and politicians were brought together in a model of consensual policy-making and enactment. Such political exertions on the part of Dunedin leaders had genuine impacts on ordinary people in the colony. In explaining how this was so, the authors address and enhance discussions about New Zealand conservatism (again noting Fairburn's seminal contribution). They write: 'if New Zealand society was conservative, as many commentators have held, our results suggest it was only because men of all strata and classes had enjoyed access to occupational opportunities no less than to housing, education, and by the end of the period, medical services' (p.139).

What was it about social structures in New Zealand that were different from other societies? And how does social structure and occupation change in New Zealand between the 1880s and 1940? In Dunedin, religious divisions were not as important as in Britain or the United States. Here, within white society, sectarianism (particularly anti-Irish anti-Catholicism) was far more vehement and divisive. New Zealand was not without some of the pain of religious strife, but it was much less pronounced. Marriage patterns in south Dunedin were fluid, with low rates of endogamy within classes. The findings overall are startling. Rates of exogamy ran at twice those of England, while England's hard marriage lines between the skilled and unskilled were not present in New Zealand. In Dunedin, in gender terms, women, not men, tended to be the ones who married 'down'. Even the unskilled, whose class remained most coherent, in marital terms, married out of their class at a rate of over 40%, whilst around one-third of upper-middle-class men and women chose partners from the manual working class. Given the absence of an aristocracy, this was not quite Lady Chatterley marrying Mellors. But it was quite clear that cross-class connections amounted to very much more than a roll in the hay.

Occupational status was less fluid than we might have expected. This was due to the prominence of skilled work. For crafts tended to fix a man's trade early in life through apprenticeships, or some similar system of selection and training. The rise of white collar work, of course, created flexibility and opportunities for women, and the least skilled

were among the most mobile. As much as anything, New Zealand stressed the principles of improvement, *embourgeoisement* (not least through home-ownership) and the value of trades. In recognising this, Olssen et al note the conclusions of Albert Métin about the pervasiveness of middle-class values and desires: 'The Anglo-Saxon worker [in Australasia] has become a *gentleman*.... He lives in his own house, changes his clothes after work and conducts himself as though a member of polite society' (p.105). At the same time, the importance of 'joker culture' and of the 'mateship' described vividly in Jock Phillips's *A Man's Country?*, went hand-in-hand with a utilitarian appreciation of 'skill and dexterity' and a rejection of bookishness and snobbery (p.105). In New Zealand, there was nothing wrong with getting your hands dirty; indeed, such work was revered. If you were upwardly mobile, you had done well; if you remained in the manual class, you were nevertheless recognised for a valuable contribution. The explanations of a fluid society tie these emerging New Zealand values with the fundamental fact that this was a society of immigrants. The authors capture the essence neatly: 'In a colony where ditching was more important than most intellectual or artistic activities, men with physical strength and dexterity were admired. This helped to dissolve any stigma attached to unskilled labour in England. Navvies and wharfies were respected. So were the tough men of the rural frontier and the runs, the drovers who shepherded the flocks along the Main South Road and the shearers who wintered over' (p.181).

Interestingly, however, there was fixity to certain working-class cohorts which echoed comparable groups in the Old World. In England, fiercely held craft practices ensured that, where possible, ship-builders begat ship-builders and boys followed their collier fathers into the best-paid face work in coal mines. In New Zealand also, inter-generational mobility was not high for the skilled. But it was never so fixed. As the authors note, sons of skilled men sometimes broke with craft traditions and elected for semi- or unskilled work in New Zealand to ensure greater personal freedoms. Glancing in the opposite direction, impressive progress was made by the children of unskilled parents in attaining white-collar work. In this regard, we see the type of rapid advancement noted in another city of incredibly rapid growth: San Francisco.

The essence of all this was a flatter, but highly mobile, society. The effects of inheritance were smaller in such a recently made society, and 'the introduction of a sharply graduated income tax in 1915, when most families were only in their second generation in New Zealand, further reduced inequalities of income and wealth' (p.183). This, state arbitration over wages and a generally accepted culture of egalitarianism ensured the gaps between rich and poor were small, though the wealthy were nowhere near as wealthy as their British and particularly American counterparts. Even in New South Wales, the authors tell us (citing the work of Margaret Galt), the wealthy had more money than their New Zealand equivalents. As the twentieth century progressed, the emphasis upon the equality of breadwinners ensured that this gap would remain small. Only in the 1980s was this compact ripped up, allowing for bankers, senior managers and the like to be paid many, many times what their lowliest employees earned. But back in the authors' period, cultural attitudes, temporally compressed colonial development, the effects of recent immigration and a raft of state policies ensured that 'New Zealand was not a utopia by accident' (p.183).

There is much in this work to confirm New Zealanders' self-image of economic opportunity and social equality. New Zealanders certainly shared a utopian ideal, even if it excluded Māori and offered rather less to non-breadwinning women. This study does much to reveal the intricacies of a Pākehā society in the making. Great credit is due to Olssen and his numerous co-workers on the Caversham project for a body of works which stretches far beyond this particular volume. Their efforts should ensure that the work conducted in Dunedin over nearly four decades will shape, not follow, research in

other countries. As for the study under review: it is a technically accomplished, highly original and intellectually stimulating work which deserves a wide readership.

DONALD M. MacRAILD

Northumbria University, UK

*A Simple Nullity? The Wi Parata Case in New Zealand Law & History.* By David V. Williams. Auckland University Press, 2011. 287pp. NZ price: \$49.99. ISBN: 978-1-86940-484-0.

I KNEW THAT I WOULD LIKE Professor David V. Williams's latest book before I had even opened its first pages for it presented an interesting quandary: one of my favourite scholars writing about one of my (so I thought before I read this book) least liked judicial decisions. As the title suggests, this is a book about a legal case, *Wi Parata v Bishop of Wellington* (1877) 3 NZ Jur (NS) 72 (SC), decided in 1877 by the then Supreme Court (now High Court). This case, as Williams notes, is 'a landmark decision in New Zealand law for its dismissal of the Treaty of Waitangi' (p.3). In fact, the court declared the Treaty to be 'a simple nullity', a line that has since reverberated throughout legal history and gives the book its opening title.

The popular 'facts' of the case state that in 1848 the chief of the Ngāti Toa tribe sought to give tribal land at Whitireia as an endowment for a school to be established there to educate the tribal children. The chief accordingly entered into a verbal arrangement with the then-Lord Bishop of New Zealand. In 1850 a Crown grant was made, without the knowledge or consent of the tribe, to the Lord Bishop. The grant stated that the land had been ceded from Ngāti Toa for the school. However, no school of any kind was ever established. Ngāti Toa sued, seeking return of the land. Ngāti Toa lost the case. Chief Judge Prendergast, whose name appears on the judgment for the court, ruled in favour of the Crown grant. The court stated:

On the foundation of this colony the aborigines were found without any kind of civil government, or any settled system of law. There is no doubt that during a series of years the British Government desired and endeavoured to recognize the independent nationality of New Zealand. But the thing neither existed nor at the time could be established. The Maori tribes were incapable of performing the duties, and therefore of assuming the rights, of a civilised community.

Prendergast explained:

On the cession of territory by one civilised power to another, the rights of private property are invariably respected, and the old law of the country is administered, to such extent as may be necessary, by the Courts of the new sovereign . . . . But in the case of primitive barbarians, the supreme executive Government must acquit itself, as best it may, of its obligation to respect native proprietary rights, and of necessity must be the sole arbiter of its own justice.

Prendergast concluded that 'the title of the Crown to the country was acquired, *jure gentium*, by discovery and priority of occupation, as a territory inhabited only by savages'. In reaching this conclusion, Prendergast observed that the Treaty of Waitangi provided little support to the Ngāti Toa argument because the Treaty was 'a simple nullity'.

At the turn of the century, the Privy Council deemed such reasoning in *Wi Parata* as going 'too far' (*Nireaha Tamaki v Baker* [1901] A.C. 561). However, New Zealand's judiciary ignored the Privy Council, the only occasion where a local court publicly avowed its disapproval of a superior tribunal's ruling. Later, in 1941, the Privy Council