

Reviews (Books)

Richard Seddon: King of God's Own: The Life and Times of New Zealand's Longest-Serving Prime Minister. By Tom Brooking. Penguin, Auckland, 2014. 584pp. NZ price: \$65.00. ISBN: 9780143569671.

The reign of 'King Dick' coincides with a transitional stage in New Zealand politics. The shifting cliques and factions, provincial or otherwise, that were the cement of nineteenth-century politics were soon to give way to the class-based parties that became a feature of the twentieth. Central to the process was a redefinition of the New Zealand version of colonial liberalism. In practical terms, this meant using and expanding the role of the state in ways that strengthened the hands of 'the people' against landed, commercial and political elites held to be perverting the development of the colony. It also opened the way for a transformation of the colonial economy and the rise of the cow cocky.

Historians have commonly depicted Seddon's role in this transition as that of a pragmatic, populist and jingoistic imperialist who bestrode the political scene as genial, untutored 'King Dick', called time on reform, and crudely swatted his political rivals to the sidelines. Tom Brooking's impressive 'life and times' penetrates beyond the elements of caricature inherent in such simplifications. He presents a persuasive and closely argued case for regarding the colourful Kumara publican as playing a much more instrumental role in shaping a new political age. By Brooking's assessment, Seddon's achievement was that he presided over and came to personify a pervasive culture of 'popular liberalism' whose temper was broadly democratic. Its core values embraced an egalitarian ethos that decried privilege and preferment, sought to assist 'deserving' elements of the community and promoted the widening of the franchise. Seddon's version of liberalism also embraced a jingoistic imperialism wrapped in the language of an embryonic colonial nationalism. The economic thinking that underpinned these aspirations was expansionist and accompanied by a preparedness to curb the unfettered operation of the free market by a range of state interventions.

Seddon's personality loomed large and suited his times. His broad Lancashire dialect and apparent lack of formal education were, Brooking argues, an affront to the political and monied elite of landowners and investors who thought themselves the colony's natural leaders. His life experiences in the old world, as in the new, stood closer to those of the common colonist. Seddon's schoolteacher parents belonged to 'the precarious middle class', and their increasingly stressed circumstances led to the young Seddon being apprenticed in foundries until he qualified as a mechanical engineer. He later came to share his parents' belief in education as an agent of social improvement and he was also influenced by his mother's Methodism and his father's broad and tolerant Anglicanism. Indeed, Brooking suggests that in later life Seddon's beliefs took on a mildly Christian Socialist hue.

A working life that began in St Helens and Liverpool, followed by stints on the Victorian goldfields and in railway workshops near Melbourne, ensured that Seddon was well acquainted with the masculinist working-class culture of his day and at ease

with it. While this was later to prove an aid to his emergence as a local political figure on the West Coast, Brooking's account is a salutary caution against placing too much stress upon the 'rough and tough' elements of his personality. These were exaggerated within the gentlemanly world of the colonial parliament that he later entered, where his opponents cast him as a Kumara publican and boisterous goldfields politician. It was a condescension that, as Brooking notes, was to a degree shared by his principal rivals within Liberal ranks – Robert Stout and William Pember Reeves. Seddon was able to outflank these two middle-class professionals and take control of the Liberal agenda precisely because he understood the aspirations of the electorate and had more in common with most of the voters than they did.

Seddon was in this sense the people's premier. Brooking demonstrates, however, that his 'popular Liberalism' was rooted in the moralism of the Bible and more than a casual acquaintance with the intellectual currents of his day. As 'Minister of Very Nearly Everything', he left his mark on much of the Liberal legislative achievement. The increased role of the state over which he presided and the 'administrative revolution' that it produced gave considerable influence to officials with programmes. Seddon's skill was that he consistently supported reform initiatives across a wide range of activities. With the 'deserving' working class in mind, he supported the introduction of a system of old-age pensions and a state housing programme. He also championed a 'free place' for children of merit that opened up secondary school education to the sons and daughters of working families, and he attempted to improve maternal welfare by introducing registration for midwives and establishing maternity hospitals on grounds that were egalitarian and humane.

Brooking's discussion of how Seddon assumed control of Native Affairs and sought simultaneously to open up Māori land for development and to bring 'justice to the Native race' is subtly drawn. His party's expansionist economic prescription, with its focus upon developing the North Island, put the issue of Māori land at the centre of its programme. As premier, he brought undoubted mana to a task he initially approached with an assimilationist perspective. Brooking sees Seddon's role in the genesis of the Māori Land Councils as grounded in 'genuine intentions' and 'humanitarianism', and argues that his attempts to find statist and collectivist solutions were not so much racist in their conception as limited by an inability to perceive the diversity of Māori opinion. Seddon's contribution was that he ensured Māori became 'an integral part' of the 'better Britain' he envisaged. The invitation to become part of his 'experiment at social improvement' was – Brooking points out – not extended to 'Asians, Dalmatians or Lebanese or other persons of non-British extraction'. Thus did Seddon's particular version of nation-building 'set New Zealand on a bi- rather than a mono- or a multicultural trajectory' (p.256).

Tom Brooking's finely drawn study rescues Seddon the man from the personal caricature that had in large measure been drawn by political opponents and cartoonists, both approving and condescending. Whatever label we attach to Seddon's liberalism – 'practical', 'popular' or 'utopian' – it has provided something of a foundational political culture from which leaders of a wide variety of persuasions have sought legitimacy. Whether this legacy survives the resurgence of the free market nostrums, whose worst consequences Seddon shunned, is of course a question that remains

unclear. It is one that Tom Brooking has thrown into clearer perspective by putting ideas at the centre of a biography of a political leader frequently and erroneously praised for his lack of them.

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Outcasts of the Gods? The Struggle over Slavery in Māori New Zealand. By Hazel Petrie. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2015. 406pp. \$45.00. ISBN: 9781869408305.

Nine years after the release of Hazel Petrie's *Chiefs of Industry*, which has become the standard text on Māori entrepreneurial activity in the early colonial period, her *Outcasts of the Gods* has been published. This is a comprehensively researched work addressing an important aspect of Māori society. Most of the book deals with the early colonial period, but there is also insightful analysis of the pre-contact era.

One of the accomplishments of this book is the way in which Petrie navigates through traditional and colonial sources – created both by Māori and Pākehā – with careful attention to the cultural contexts from which these sources emerged. This task is made all the more intricate by the numerous and shifting definitions of slavery employed by various groups over the period under review. As Petrie concedes, 'inconsistencies in vocabulary or the way in which words were applied ... [have] a major part to play in confounding the evidence' (p.324).

Despite these challenges, Petrie offers an informed and balanced overview of the broad nature of slavery in Māori society. In the course of the book, she demonstrates both that the notion of a slave in English is too general to apply to a variety of categories of captives in traditional and early colonial Māori society, and that it tends to conjure images of African-American slavery, which is misleading in the New Zealand context. The work draws mainly on sources either written or transcribed by Europeans, but Petrie succeeds in extracting insights from their core, while leaving the husk of colonial-era Pākehā prejudices behind.

Partly because this is relatively little-explored territory, there are comparatively few historiographical issues to contend with. This leaves Petrie free to examine the incidents, nature, extent and conceptions of Māori 'slavery' in considerable detail. Part of this examination extends to an exploration of the bearing that traditional Māori cultural and religious values had on the practice of slavery. This sometimes throws up some counter-intuitive results, such as the reasonably common practices of slaves being free to return to their home community, of marriages between slaves and free people, and of some slaves preferring to remain in the communities of their captors even when there was no longer any compulsion to do so.

There are very occasional shortcomings in *Outcasts of the Gods*. Petrie's description, for example, of early nineteenth-century New Zealand as 'an abnormal