

The New Zealand Labour Party 1916–2016. By Peter Franks and Jim McAloon, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2016. 335pp. NZ price: \$50.00. ISBN: 9781776560745.

The New Zealand Labour Party 1916–2016 confirms that the observation often made in Australia, that Labour tells its history better than its opponents, holds true equally for New Zealand, Barry Gustafson's cross-over history of the National Party in New Zealand notwithstanding.

Franks and McAloon have produced a highly accessible, cogent and entertaining history of the Labour Party, one moreover that not only sets the party firmly in its national context but also acknowledges the international framework from which it initially sprang and which also continues to frame its ideological flavour. Most impressively, this book avoids the error common to many survey histories of spending so much time on origins and formative years that more recent history has to be accommodated within too few pages. Here, the authors achieve an effective balance between the Labour Party's deep history and more recent history and apply this to good effect.

The chapters dealing with recent history are a highlight of the book. The transition to a 'smaller, more democratic party' in the 1950s and 1960s is handled deftly, while the potentially even more difficult cycle of election success, defeat and renewal in the years that have followed track an absorbing history of ambitious economic and social reform agendas, ultimately stymied by a potent mixture of global events, economic weakness and internal party disputes. The personal influence of leaders such as Norman Kirk, David Lange and Helen Clark is used to good effect as a device to drive this narrative.

For an Australian labour historian, to read the book's first chapter is to read, with suitable regional variation, a history equivalent to the emergence of a Labor Party in Australia, particularly in Victoria and New South Wales. But given the economic integration of the nineteenth century and the permeability of borders between New Zealand and Australia to people and politics, this is hardly surprising. What is more notable is the degree of divergence apparent by the early twentieth century and the rate at which that trajectory continued between world wars and after. The difficult birth-pangs of the New Zealand Labour Party stand in contrast to the rapid rise of a national Labor Party in Australia, pressed on by the political demands of Federation following 1901. In contrast to New Zealand, Australian experiments in popular socialist political formations in the years leading up to 1914 were generally relegated to the periphery of the labour movement. But it is really events such as the interwar pact between New Zealand labour and the Rātana movement (at a time when the Australian Labor Party found it impossible to imagine indigenous Australians having the vote, let alone being elected to Parliament) that demonstrate the degree to which the Labour Party in New Zealand was pushing the boundaries of labour and social democratic practice. And as Franks and McAloon so eloquently demonstrate, this is a tendency that has continued down to the present.

The clever selection of photographs is another strength of this volume, but the collective impact of the party members' pictures, either individually or collectively, not only testifies to the fervent embrace of party and politics but inevitably throws up the question: what should be emphasized in the history of a labour party, what can be left out? Should it emphasize organization or political terrain, Parliament or people?

While there is no simple right or wrong formula, this book tends to leave the people of the party in the shadows. For a book dedicated to ‘all the men and women of the New Zealand Labour movement’ they appear too sporadically. Like any social democratic party, the New Zealand Labour Party exists to achieve and hold government, but while the parliamentary political dimension is extremely well canvassed, we finish by knowing relatively little about the men and women who drove and sustained the party over the past century and who do not, now, need to remain beyond the pale of a comprehensive history such as this. The activities of party branches in their wider community do appear (pp.102–3, for example), but these are too descriptive and too brief to contribute to the analysis of the nature of the party instead lending a bit of local colour.

Raphael Samuel’s essays on *The Lost World of British Communism* remains the benchmark in this respect.¹ His deployment of an extraordinary range of political, cultural and social sources underpins his successful efforts to reconstitute a political *mentalité* that delineates a political commitment to the labour movement that could infiltrate all aspects of working life as well as defining rhythms and patterns of daily recreation and private hours. Such an approach is not without its problems, and the divide between a rigorous delineation of an embracing political culture of daily life and fond, mythic remembrance of what should have been can be hard to avoid (as Samuel himself demonstrates at times), but his ability to evoke the realities of a political, labour life remains compelling. This is a vantage point that has been neglected in survey accounts of Australasian labo(u)r parties, and it is to our loss. If we fail to understand exactly what it meant to be a rank and file party member, to live in a labour family, to commit to the party and focus one’s life around the objectives and fortunes of the party, to accommodate a pattern where, in terms of long political cycles, failure can often outweigh success — in other words, the power of the party outside Parliament — then we ultimately fail to comprehend just why labour parties tend to be so long-lived and to appreciate the social and cultural forces that sustain them.

Similarly, concentration on national policy and national events tends to obscure any regional characteristics that may have influenced the political and social trajectory of the party. What impact did Dunedin’s early industrial prominence have upon the party’s evolution, and what was the effect of its long-term industrial decline? When the party broke into agricultural areas and industries such as dairying in the 1920s and 1930s (the ‘legitimate working farmers’ in party language) similar questions could be asked (p.56).

These issues aside, Franks and McAloon have produced a potent history of the New Zealand Labour Party. That they take that history up to the present, and address the current cycle of defeat and renewal adds to this book’s impact and emphasizes the continuities of people, policy and passion that has powered the party for more than a century.

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NOTE

1 Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism*, Verso, London, 2006.