

*As It Was: Growing Up in Grey Lynn and Ponsonby Between the Wars.* By Russell Stone. David Ling Publishing, Mangawhai, 2017. 240pp. NZ price: \$34.99. ISBN: 9781927305287.

PART MEMOIR, PART SOCIAL HISTORY, *As It Was* is a delightful book. Like any memoirist, Russell Stone had to confront the issue of how you make the details of your personal life, which are really of intrinsic interest only to your family and your friends, also tell us something of wider significance, something a historian might find useful. Stone's answer is to use his personal memories as a springboard to examining the material and cultural conditions (and both are valuable) of working-class Auckland in the interwar years.

The framework is set by Stone's life. Born in 1923, he grew up in Grey Lynn where his father, a returned soldier, had once worked in Hellaby's meat works, but eventually developed a business as an itinerant butter man. His father's parents had a house in Ponsonby where the young boy spent much time; and on his mother's side his grandfather was a newspaperman. The Stones were not totally poverty-stricken; his father was never unemployed, but they did have to scrimp and make do. This included economizing during the slump years by packing the house with relatives – no fewer than 11 people were living there at one stage. Stone takes the story through to when he was called up to the army as an 18-year-old in 1941.

For a person in his mid-nineties, Stone has a remarkable memory for the details of day-to-day life. He uses these details to explore wider generalizations about social life. The memories flow easily and interestingly into statistics drawn from yearbooks and perspectives derived from historiography, both local and international. Underpinning his discussion is Stone's unparalleled knowledge of the business history of Auckland.

As a result, the reader learns a great deal about how working people lived in those years. The physical conditions are described in fascinating detail. It was not until 1929, when Russell was six, that the family home had electricity. So, we learn how the family cooked and washed and provided light in the pre-electric days. We learn about the lean-to scullery and wash-house, and the details of the 'dunny'. It turns out that most people, to avoid a trapeze outside at night, used chamber pots, or 'pos', which, however, were 'to be used only for number one and never for number two' (p.68)! For lavatory paper, old newspapers cut into sheets and old business catalogues did the business. We find out about furnishing and learn that often floors were covered in scatter rugs made from old clothing or stockings. There is an engrossing chapter detailing the diverse skills required of a housewife in a family with little money. She had to be 'budgeter, cook, seamstress, embroiderer, needlewoman, knitter and even home doctor' (p.126). The picture is of the colonial helpmeet come to town. As home doctor, Stone's mother would treat earache by pouring warmed olive oil in the ear.

Always alive to economic history, Stone is also interested in the nature of commerce. He describes the various travelling salespeople, like his father the butter man, who called at the house to offer goods and services; and he has an eye for the clusters of local shops that were to be found within walking distance. Then, of course, there were the big department stores in town. On her visits there his mother would dress up formally and make a real day out. She explained that 'You never know when one of those street photographers might snap you!' (p.137) – so it was on with the worsted-serge costume, the silk blouse, the best purse and the smart fur hat!

While the material details of life in those years are evoked richly, I particularly enjoyed Stone's awareness of popular culture. He offers vivid descriptions of his own boyhood interests: in marbles and comics, American cowboy movies and two night-time spectator sports – wrestling and dirt trackers or motor bike racers. There is also his reading, from American comics to *Boy's Own Annuals*. There is excellent analysis of schools, both primary and then, as one of the lucky few, at Mount Albert Grammar School where, in Form 4A during 1937, he met a young Keith Sinclair.

Stone has a great ear; and you will find many, long-forgotten, examples of the popular language of the era – 'I mind', meaning 'I remember'; the 'yard', as the unbuilt part of the 'section'; and 'youse', as the plural of 'you'. Sometimes the words followed from the material situation – so the absence of refrigeration meant that 'stale', 'sour', 'rancid' and 'curdled' were common expressions – and sometimes they followed the impact of popular culture – so American movies gave us 'super-doooper', 'whoopee', 'scram' and 'vamoose'.

As a historian, Stone is aware of the dangers of soft nostalgia, which is why he always supplements his memory with the historiography. But he does claim the old bromide that 'life was simpler then' (p.7), which in my view seems absolutely contradicted by the incredible feats of organization, in dealing with travelling salespeople, or trips to many specialized small shops, which his mother especially was forced to carry out if the family was to flourish. I cannot believe she thought her life was 'simple'.

Another minor criticism is the lack of an index. *As It Was* is such a valuable account of the social experience of the interwar years that it should function not only as an engrossing read, but as a reliable source of reference for social historians. An index would have paid due justice to a fascinating and informative book.

JOCK PHILLIPS

*Mount Cook, Wellington*

*The Unconventional Career of Dr Muriel Bell.* By Diana Brown. Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2018. 196pp. NZ price: \$35. ISBN: 9781988531304.

ONE OF THE PLEASURES of this book is the way in which it takes common features of New Zealand dining tables and kitchen benches and makes them unfamiliar. In so doing, Diana Brown underlines Muriel Bell's 'revolutionary' work getting iodine in salt, fluoride in water, and milk in schools in order to improve the health of New Zealanders.

Brown uses Bell's career as New Zealand's first state nutritionist to examine how medical research and nutritional science were shaped by gender across the twentieth century. Bell's early years in medicine illustrate how the field of nutrition opened new opportunities for women during the first half of the twentieth century. Her professional and intellectual achievements in the face of sexism in universities, hospitals and research laboratories make for a jaw-dropping read. Brown's point about sexism is underlined by the 1963 closure of the Nutrition Research Unit that Bell led.