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2011



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Political history

Farmer Bill

Doug Munro

A Great New Zealand Prime Minister? Reappraising William Ferguson Massey

James Watson and Lachy Paterson (eds)
Otago University Press, \$39.99,
ISBN 9781877578076

New Zealand political biography is in good shape, largely thanks to Barry Gustafson and Michael Bassett. Between them they have written biographies of six 20th-century prime ministers – Gustafson: Michael Savage, Keith Holyoake and Robert Muldoon; Bassett: Joseph Ward, Gordon Coates and Peter Fraser. These are scholarly and heavily-referenced works, and a credit to their authors, as is Ray Richards's recent biography of Geoffrey Palmer. Discounting the more impressionistic memoirs that appear from time to time, there are obvious gaps in the coverage. A decent biography of Richard Seddon is at least in the pipeline but a proper biography of Norman Kirk is nowhere in sight. There is a full-scale biography of New Zealand's second longest serving Prime Minister, William Ferguson Massey (1912-25), by Bruce Farlane, but he is, frankly, not in the same league as Bassett and Gustafson.

Massey's reputation has taken a bashing down the years, not least, as Watson and Paterson point out, because New Zealand historical writing has been dominated by the political Left. Here one is reminded of Bill Oliver's wry remark that there "is a germ of truth in the charge that the New Zealand left is constantly winning in books the battles it long ago lost in reality". Certainly Massey won the fight against militant unionism in 1912-13 and he deployed staunch strike-breaking techniques in doing so. The legacy of bitterness it left has been seen as in keeping with other aspects of Massey's generally negative reputation – the country bumpkin ("Farmer Bill"), bereft of ideas, lacking in vision, an arch-conservative, the bun-boy of international capitalism. Throw in jingoism and sectarianism and you complete the picture. I wonder whether David Low had Massey half in mind when he created his cartoon character Colonel Blimp. The physical resemblances between the two seem more than coincidental.

Massey's popular image is a one-dimensional caricature. There is a great deal more to him than the stereotypes into which he has been cast, and the book under review is part of an ongoing reappraisal of Massey's life and work. What is singularly lacking is any attempt, beyond the occasional passing reference, to confront and address the manner in which Massey crushed militant labour in the 1912-13 strikes. Whether it is a case of avoidance, denial or inadvertence is beside the point. Quite simply, to evade Massey's role in industrial relations makes as much sense as assessing Sid Holland without reference to the 1951 waterfront dispute.

Questions of coverage and balance hang over this book, in particular the uneven treatment of Massey's career. He became a consummate politician but there is little on his work as a parliamentarian and political strategist on the domestic front, whether the consolidation of his party, forging political alliances, his adeptness in parliament, relations with senior colleagues and public servants, the quality of his leadership, and the management of his own Cabinet. The bitsy, pick-and-miss character of the book can best be illustrated by contrasting it with a comparable volume, *Peter Fraser: Master Politician* (edited by Margaret Clark in 1998). Also a volume of conference proceedings, and only slightly longer, it covered the ground more comprehensively. This

was partly because the individual chapters were more broadly based and less specialised, and a similar approach would have given the present volume greater coherence.

In the Fraser volume, for example, there is a chapter on Fraser and Maori, whereas the present volume contains a more narrowly focused chapter by Ashley Gould on Maori participation in the soldier settlement scheme. It is an able and well-researched chapter, but one that would have been more suitable as a journal article. Both volumes rightly have separate chapters on Massey's and Fraser's wives. Christina Massey, as Linda Bryder shows, was more than helpmeet. She also extended her skills to the public sphere as a prominent figure in the Plunket Society. Overall, more chapters along the lines of Brad Patterson's discussion of Massey's fight for freehold land tenure, which was central to his philosophy, were needed.

In certain respects Massey may be compared to Keith Holyoake. Both were on the conservative side of politics, and both were part of New Zealand's then tradition of farmer prime ministers. Just as Holyoake cannot be dismissed as a "pompous ass", so Massey has been generally underrated. A point of difference between Holyoake and Massey is that the latter was prime minister in far more turbulent times, including a world war, and Holyoake did not have to build a political party. He inherited his predecessors' creation. There are certainly grounds to reappraise Massey, and the opening chapter sets the tone of the book. Rather than asking why the stereotypes attaching to Massey have persisted, Eric Olssen elaborates on his own more positive reevaluation of the man and in doing so provides personal reflection and historiographic discussion. His chapter is worth the price of admission alone.

Several of the other chapters suggest new ways of looking at Massey. In examining the repercussions of Massey's Irish origins, Jock Phillips remarks that his low-church Protestant background meant that "His experience was the experience of thousands, and the values which that background produced were shared by many others". More controversially, the chapter by Miles Fairburn and S J Haslett on voting patterns suggests that the vote for Massey between 1911 and 1914 was "remarkably broad-spectrum", meaning that Massey may well have had to contend with "less intense" social divisions than has hitherto been imagined. Rory Sweetman does not question the extent of Massey's jingoism and rampant Empire loyalty but suggests that his anti-Catholicism was based less on sectarianism and more on his perception of Catholics as a threat to the British Empire.

Despite these reservations about the essays' uneven coverage, *A Great New Zealand Prime Minister?*, as a whole, takes several steps in the right direction towards the necessary reassessment of Massey and, hopefully, towards the type of full-scale biography that is so much needed.

Doug Munro is a Wellington-based biographer and historian.

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"Call me Hairy" (what they wrote)

New Zealand Books

Editors: Harry Ricketts, Jane Westaway
Advertising: Annesley Kingston
Business Co-ordinator: Jody Jessep
Layout: Matrix Typography Limited www.matrix-typography.co.nz
New Zealand Books is published by Peppercorn Press, a registered charity, Wellington, New Zealand.

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ISSN 1170-9103



Many happy returns!

We're delighted to be writing the editorial for this 20th anniversary issue of *New Zealand Books*. It contains the usual excellent reviews, but also new poetry and prose, and reflections from leading writers and those in the book world on reviewing and being reviewed.

The journal was founded by John Mansfield Thomson, Lauris Edmond, Vincent O'Sullivan, Pat Hawthorne, Martin Bond and Shelagh Duckham Cox, who comprised Peppercorn Press. Early issues appeared under Thomsons' editorship. Guest editors, such as Nelson Wattie, Jane Stafford and Paula Wagemaker, succeeded him, before Colin James became editor in 1994. Harry Ricketts and Bill Sewell took over as co-editors in 1998, and on Bill Sewell's death in 2003, Jane Westaway joined Ricketts as co-editor.

In our December 2005 issue, Tim Hazledine wrote that "the sum of all the reading and talking and engaging with books is an essential contribution to our culture, our civilisation, our sense of nationhood; even to our economic capabilities as an intelligent, well-educated, literate citizenry." The co-editors and board of NZB are convinced he is right.

Ten years ago, Ricketts and Sewell bemoaned the lack of coverage given to our books, particularly in the mainstream media (March 2001). If anything, accompanied by the "democratising" effect of blogs



and other online outlets for "reviews", this situation has worsened. NZB continues to provide a journal of record, a "place for writers to see their work given a thorough critical treatment", and a way for readers to take the pulse of our current writing.

Birthday speeches must include thanks. Without the generous support of Creative New Zealand, we simply couldn't exist. Nor without the authors who write our books, the publishers who produce them, and the writers who review them. Just as important is you, the reader, who cares about these books and who reads NZB. Subscribers are our survival – give a sub for Christmas!

We are deeply appreciative of the support, energy and enthusiasm of the Peppercorn Press board – Elizabeth Caffin, Kathryn Carmody, Anne Elise, Kate Fortune and Peter Russell – and of our advertising manager Annesley Kingston. Also grateful thanks to our advertisers. Finally, a special thank-you to our typographer Walter Walraven of Matrix Typography, whose expertise and good humour continue unabated after 15 years.

In that first 1991 editorial, Thomson pointed out that books were "one of our chief cultural assets", though "undervalued ... by economic policy makers". The journal aimed to "provide a forum for the finest available writing and criticism of books". It would "stimulate pride and critical concern in New Zealand writing".

These lofty ideals have been interpreted in various ways by a succession of editors, but we hope Thomson himself would enjoy this anniversary issue.

We've marked the occasion by commissioning several opinion pieces on reviewing and being reviewed, as well as new poetry, prose work in progress, and two writers on their favourite childhood books. And on the back page you'll find a bumper cryptic crossword worth a \$75 book token prize.

Harry Ricketts and Jane Westaway



The six original founders: (from left to right) Shelagh Duckham Cox, Martin Bond, John M Thomson, Pat Hawthorne, Lauris Edmond, Vincent O'Sullivan (inset).

Beachfront

So much advice coming your way like wind-blown leaves. 'Never give up until you see indifference,' one says; another, a woman recently split from her husband for no good reason, tells you 'few women ignore persistence, so keep it up.' So you do.

It was nice at the beach today, a shag fishing in the small, curling blue-green waves, light-filled water lapping on the sandy shore and warped wooden remains of an old wharf, and you walked and talked about inconsequential matters that mattered and don't ever go away.

Brian Turner

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