

Fitz: The Colonial Adventures of James Edward FitzGerald

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'When the history of this colony comes to be written,' declared Robert Stout in a funeral tribute in 1896, 'there will be no name amongst the great names we have had in New Zealand that will stand out so bright as that of James Edward FitzGerald.' And yet, while contemporaries came to be feted by twentieth-century New Zealand historians, FitzGerald's star had already faded. It was not until 1998 that Edmund Bohan's substantial biography, *'Blest Madman': FitzGerald of Canterbury*, appeared. Now, sixteen years later, a further equally substantial volume is presented by Jenifer Roberts. Does FitzGerald merit this additional attention? For this reviewer the answer must be yes. Bohan was primarily interested in FitzGerald's public life; Roberts's focus, no exercise in revisionism, is more rounded, as much on the private man and his family. Essentially, the two studies are complementary.

That James Edward FitzGerald, popularly known as Fitz, was a prominent colonial figure is beyond question. Over the course of nearly half a century he played an important role in the establishment of the Canterbury settlement, was the first Pilgrim ashore in 1850, became the first Superintendent of the Province of Canterbury three years later, served in the colony's first Parliament, and in fact briefly headed the General Government's first ministry. In all, he was elected four times to the House of Representatives for Canterbury constituencies, accepting appointment as Native Minister in the short-lived 1865 Weld Ministry. An outspoken advocate for Maori rights, he was to later claim moral responsibility for the 1867 creation of Maori parliamentary seats. He also, incidentally, later claimed credit for the transfer of the capital from Auckland to Wellington. Canterbury, however, was always at the forefront of his concerns and, following a stint as the province's Immigration Agent in London between 1858 and 1860, he served two further terms on the Provincial Council in the 1860s. Always a larger than life character, in these years he was regarded as having no equals in the colony as orator or political pamphleteer or columnist.

A younger son of an Anglo-Irish landowning family, Fitz brought only limited resources with him to the colony. Therefore, in parallel to developing his political persona, he was obliged to make his way financially. Hence his initial endeavours to build extensive pastoral

properties on the Canterbury Plains (the launching capital being put up by influential English friends), his involvement in the founding of two newspapers (*Lyttelton Times*, *The Press*), and his incessant pondering of other potentially lucrative ventures. There was nevertheless to be an abrupt switch in 1867, Fitz forsaking politics and Canterbury and shifting to Wellington to take up the post of Comptroller-General, then in 1878 Auditor-General. He was to hold office at the forefront of the emerging civil service for almost 30 years, winning an Australasian reputation for his conscientiousness and integrity. It may be regarded as an index of his official standing that he became a founder of the Public Service Association and the first elected president of the New Zealand Society of Accountants.

Despite this seeming galaxy of achievements, however, it would be difficult to label Fitz a complete success. There were too many character flaws; too many unwise decisions. Often engaging and gregarious, the life and soul of gatherings, he was also subject to violent mood swings, fits of depression, bouts of hypochondria. Fitz could not only charm, he could also annoy and exasperate. His behaviour as a politician was all too often erratic, bursts of intense activity followed by prolonged inertia, his judgement compromised by petty dislikes and hatreds. Regarded as divisive, he was never a team man. In the opinion of shrewd old William Gisborne he was 'rash, impetuous and inattentive to good advice'. In short, Fitz as politician simply couldn't be relied upon and was thus never to quite fulfil his early promise. These unfortunate traits were to some extent curbed once he became a civil servant, but never to be completely eliminated.

Roberts shows Fitz to have been equally feckless in his private dealings, his political adventures meaning he was constantly on the verge of bankruptcy. The early pastoral investments came to little, despite regular proddings for returns from his English backers, and eventually had to be disadvantageously realised. His initially enthusiastic proprietorship of *The Press* also marked by reckless investments, was brought to a close by creditor foreclosure. Even the shift to Wellington brought only limited relief, accumulated debts drastically eroding his for the time generous civil service salary. Insensitive to the burdens he imposed on others, whether close friends or even more critically members of his immediate family, Fitz blundered on. This most recent research also indicates he was given to invention, personal recountings of his early life in some instances bordering on fantasy. Roberts has a possible explanation for the chronic instability: she suggests it is highly likely Fitz suffered from

bipolar disorder. The diagnosis seems plausible.

Wife Fanny bore the heaviest burden, and this biography is as much her story as that of Fitz himself. Indeed it was the author's original intention to concentrate on Fanny, only the discovery of new material encouraging the broadening of the scope of the project. Marrying Fanny, at 18 nearly half his age, and in the face of her family's strong disapproval, was almost certainly the best decision Fitz ever made. Loyal to a fault and long suffering, yet exhibiting incredible strength, she was to be his life-long anchor. Without questioning, she took ship with him for Canterbury within weeks of their wedding. The plan was that they would 'rough it' for a few years, make money, then enjoy the fruits of their labours. For her, at least, the enjoyment was a long time, if ever, in coming. Transported to a foreign environment, half the world from family and friends, she was to experience a life of toil, bearing 13 children and managing households with minimal domestic assistance, this dictated by the family's habitual impecuniosity. That seven of the children were buried young must have been difficult to endure, but she battled on. Correspondence suggests that on many occasions she was near the end of her tether, her husband – while devoted – remaining largely oblivious to her trials. Her love for him appears to have never flagged.

Of especial interest to readers of this journal will be the sources consulted and how they are referenced. An examination of the respective bibliographies of Bohan and Roberts suggests that the New Zealand sources consulted were largely identical (indeed the latter thanks the former in her Preface for his generous guidance in this respect). It is nevertheless likely that the research emphases were different. What is new is Roberts's use of archives in the United Kingdom, documents of which Bohan was possibly unaware. Clearly she ranged widely in her researches, and perhaps these caches contributed most to the fresh perspectives, but it is impossible to say with certainty. The referencing system adopted is the most disappointing aspect of the book. Bohan's biography was meticulously end-noted, enabling the reader to easily verify statements. In the successor, while there is a lengthy section entitled 'Notes to the Text', these amount to little more than a broad guide to sources used in particular chapters. It may well be possible to identify some of the many direct quotes from what is provided, but the pursuit is likely to be protracted and generally frustrating.

At first sight it appeared that *Fitz* might be yet another exercise in hagiography, the author freely acknowledging that she was a great-great-granddaughter, and that Fitz had been long revered by descendants as

'a great statesman – a hero of his times'. Any reservations on this score, however, were soon dispelled. While still evidencing a warm regard for her ancestor, Roberts presents him warts and all. She readily concedes his weaknesses, his failures to utilise his talents to their fullest. Her greatest sympathy and understanding is reserved for the stoic Fanny. This is an engaging book, nicely produced, well written, with a good flow. It deserves to be widely read, not just by scholars but all those who like a good human story.

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