

The Mighty Totara: The Life and Times of Norman Kirk

By David Grant.

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Reviewed by Elizabeth McLeay

Norman Kirk left school ‘at the end of standard six with a Proficiency Certificate in his pocket’ (p. 26). He was twelve years old. At the time he entered Parliament, he was a stationary engine driver, an occupation much mocked by the opposing side of New Zealand politics. Kirk was one of the last two working-class prime ministers, the other being Mike Moore, briefly in office during 1990. Not that all prime ministers have had had privileged childhoods: the state house to successful entrepreneur story with its varying narratives has been a continuing leadership marketing theme. But, apart from Moore and Jim Bolger (National Prime Minister between 1990 and 1997), who left school at 15 to work on the family farm—and who owned his own farm by the time he entered Parliament—other New Zealand prime ministers, whether Labour or National, had at least some tertiary education. The early hardship of Kirk’s life, combined with his lifelong appetite for learning shown in the ‘voluminous reading he undertook each week’ (p. 29) strongly influenced his view of politics and indeed his views of the proper role of a political leader. Kirk believed that he must represent the people from whom he came. In this welcome new biography David Grant perceptively relates the moving tale of Kirk’s early life and the extraordinary tale of this remarkable leader’s political career.

The author tells us that the ‘essence of this book is an examination of Kirk’s political leadership’ (p.9). There is a huge theoretical literature on political leadership, much of it devoted to semi-plausible typologies into which the subjects are placed. Grant avoids categorization and comparison. He draws on his strengths as an historian to relate how Kirk became ‘The Mighty Totara’, what he achieved, the nature of his personal flaws and virtues, and the events leading up to his tragically early death. There are times, however, when Grant could have dug a bit more deeply into the politics, for example providing some context on how Kirk’s road to leadership compared with others and providing more data on the crucial elections. Sometimes Grant could have been rather more critical of the sources on which he draws, and at other times he goes to the secondary source rather than directly to the original, for example seeking out Hansard and party manifestos. Nevertheless, the crucial events and decisions are ably and interestingly described and explained. The story never lags.

As Grant recognises, he follows in the footsteps of Margaret Hayward’s seminal work published some years after Kirk’s death. Kirk, the Labour Party, and subsequent scholars have been fortunate to have had such a perceptive chronicler of the Kirk years.¹ There were also early works that traced Kirk’s political pathway and electoral success in 1972 and analysed the policy developments of the third Labour government.² Books and articles have been published on the 1969 and 1972 general elections; and there are some useful biographies and autobiographies. Thus Grant had a range of secondary sources on which to draw. He supplements these with newspaper accounts and, also, the Norman Kirk Papers deposited in Archives New Zealand and records in the Railways Department (oddly omitted from the Bibliography but acknowledged in the Preface and the endnotes). Grant availed himself of the opportunity to interview some of those who remember the Kirk years, including two ministers from that era, Bob Tizard and Colin Moyle. Family members and commented on chapters. Grant reports also that two backbenchers from the 1972-1975 government, Russell Marshall and J. B. Munro, also helped out by reading chapters. Thus Grant had the advantage of writing some decades after Kirk’s life, thereby gaining historical perspective, whilst also benefitting from being able to talk with Kirk’s contemporaries (although I was somewhat surprised by the gaps in Grant’s interview list).

The author sensibly structures his book into three distinct sections (although they are not labeled as such). First he adopts a chronological approach with eleven chapters on Kirk's upbringing, early employment, marriage, his developing political career, the fight to become party leader, the battle to win the 1966 and 1969 general elections, and Labour's victory in 1972. Then there are eight thematic chapters on Labour—and Kirk—in power. These focus on policy issues and political management. Finally there is an epilogue-like section of three chapters discussing Kirk's death, its immediate aftermath, and asking, in a masterly summary, 'Who Was Norman Kirk?' Throughout this work there are insights into Kirk's personal life, including his sometimes difficult relationship with his wife, Ruth. Hence the personal runs alongside the political in the narrative. The book includes a range of illustrations and cartoons although unfortunately no list is provided. However, there is an index and a bibliography.

Any good political biography will attempt to explain just how and why its subject gained and used political power and influence. This book does just that, and it is a fascinating story to follow. Kirk served a rapid and intensive apprenticeship in the Labour movement. He became involved in his trade union, taking an elected position at the age of 20, moved into local body politics, became mayor of Kaiapoi, got involved in the local Labour electorate organisation, fought an unwinnable seat in 1954 (Hurunui) and won the marginal seat of Lyttleton in 1957. He learned to be a backbencher, gained the position of Labour Party Vice-President in 1963 (after narrowly losing the deputy-leadership position in the parliamentary party), was elected President in 1964, and successfully contested the party leadership in 1965. In 1972 Kirk led Labour into political office after twelve long years on the opposition benches. Kirk's career trajectory followed the traditional direction of the social democratic political aspirant, one that contrasts with the familiar twenty-first century pattern of university degree, ministerial or party research office staffer, business or professional life, candidature, and then into the House of Representatives.

What did Kirk's career pathway do for him? In my view it readied him for opposition and taught him how to convince others that what he thought best was also in their interests, skills that were to help him in caucus and in Parliament. These skills, although based on natural aptitudes, had to be developed and honed, as Grant convincingly explains. Perhaps, also, Kirk's personal struggles helped develop empathy with others and a degree of humility. When I interviewed him in 1971 for my research on parliamentary careers and cabinet selection he commented at one stage that, 'The fellow who thinks he's self-made doesn't realise how dependent he has been on other people.' (He could also be amusingly self-deprecating (at least for his interviewer). When I asked him whether any MPs lobbied him before the election to the 1957 Labour cabinet, he replied that no one did: 'I was either too dull or too dopey'.)

As Kirk's career developed, so did his oratorical skills. Few who heard him speak in a public arena, as I did, would ever forget his impact on his audience. He was a master of tone, timing, pace and volume. He knew when (very nearly) to whisper. And he appealed to a wide range of listeners because, even if they did not support his party, he had a way of touching on some fundamental humanitarian instincts. That he himself had had to fight for sufficient financial independence to support his growing family while at the same time serving the public at the local and national levels gave added credence to his rhetoric of change yet consolidation. Kirk also excelled in New Zealand's fiercely partisan and adversarial Parliament, learning its rules and exploiting its possibilities for his own and his party's advancement. Hugh Templeton (a cabinet minister during the Muldoon years and an acute political observer) ranks Kirk as one of the top twentieth century parliamentarians (along with F.M.B Fisher, John A. Lee, Keith Holyoake, Arnold Nordmeyer, Ron Algie and David Lange).³

Norman Kirk not only epitomised the last of the old-style Labour politicians in terms of his apprenticeship but also represented a turning point in the nature of the leadership role. As Robert Chapman observed when commenting on the 1969 general election,

The polls reveal the rapid rise of Mr Kirk and computerized factor analysis suggest that, while only a few points of Labour's policy did much to sort the voters out, Mr. Kirk himself was a prime factor in the gains supported by his party. The arena of television and the vigour of Labour's advertising made this possible. We might well look back on 1969 as the real opening of the age of television politics, as it was of public opinion polling and of public questioning and confrontation brought into the living room.⁴

Opinion polling had arrived (an aspect not fully developed by Grant); and television was changing the style of political life. Kirk, who had improved his appearance and altered his speaking manner to suit the new medium, became a superbly modern political performer (p. 553). He heightened his verbal skills by instinctively relying on his own innate grasp of the politics of symbolism, namely in being able to express what it was like to be proud to be a New Zealander, without indulging in jingoism or xenophobia.

Kirk learned from his own experiences as well as from the written word, as he illustrated in his interview with me when Leader of the Opposition. He discussed the problems of Walter Nash's conduct of the election process of the 1957 cabinet and how he would ensure that these would not recur. He recognised the importance of caucus and cabinet solidarity and how rules needed to be fair to be accepted, saying that the cabinet election 'mustn't leave behind any hard feeling or sense of injustice'. On the other hand, Kirk's own political management as Prime Minister was flawed. As Grant and others have explained, the Prime Minister constructed his cabinet in such a way that he ensured that everyone was crosschecking everyone else. The result was that at times his ministers stumbled over each other. As well, Kirk did not always adequately deal with the shortcomings of some of his ministers, as Grant points out.

Kirk tended to be suspicious of others in the way that perhaps only those who have wielded the knife themselves can imagine; he was at times insecure; and he gossiped about his colleagues to journalists.⁵ There was indeed a dark side to this politician: one commentator subtitles his chapter on Kirk 'the troubled leader'.⁶ He distrusted the public service (not the only Prime Minister to do so). In interview he told me that ministers should run their departments 'according to policy that the people had endorsed and not to be confronted with a lot of discrete advice that this is or is not possible and that is not feasible, and to accept that as an excuse'. Note though, as Grant points out, Kirk did not have the benefit of the support and advice of a prime minister's department (p. 384), an institution that was initiated by Robert Muldoon and improved under the fourth Labour government.

Another personal failing, one that eventually and tragically proved to be fatal, was that Kirk ignored his own health problems in a way that is hard to understand. His rejection, or selective acceptance, of medical advice, combined with the way in which he drove himself (from building his house at home to extensive and demanding travel abroad) contributed to his early death. Grant has researched the reasons why Norman Kirk died so young and he relates the tragic events of his last days. This is important: there was no plot to kill this Prime Minister (as has been suggested). Early privation, personal neglect and perhaps his genes, all conspired to do just this. Grant movingly portrays Kirk's decline, his passing, his funeral services, and the response from family, friends, colleagues and the public.

What were Kirk's achievements during his brief time in the office of Prime Minister? Here Grant does a sterling task. The chapters on Kirk's foreign policy initiatives are particularly interesting. Under Norman Kirk, New Zealand turned its face towards the Pacific and Asia (including recognising the People's Republic of China) while at the same time continuing its links with the Commonwealth. There were the campaigns against nuclear tests, with the famous ship sent to Mururoa. And there were Kirk's overseas visits and appearances at major international forums that enhanced New Zealand's profile and distinctive identity and

furthered its international and trade goals (aided especially by Joe Walding).⁷ One of the first difficult issues that faced Kirk was the question of the relationship between the All Blacks and the Springboks and the consequences of those sporting contacts for New Zealand race relations, New Zealand domestic harmony, and New Zealand's reputation in the world. Kirk vacillated, consulted, then bravely reversed his policy of non-interference and called off the tour, a decision nicely related by Grant. Kirk certainly made his mark on foreign policy although not necessarily in radically new directions concerning New Zealand's place in the world. Rather, Kirk voiced clearly and decisively views and directions that had been signalled earlier by his party.⁸

Under Norman Kirk's leadership, following the manifesto promises, the Government was also active on the domestic front. There were changes to social security with, among other initiatives, the introduction of the Domestic Purposes Benefit, new housing policies (including the creation of the Housing Corporation of New Zealand), bonuses for beneficiaries and, with Koro Wetere, the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal in 1975. This limited effort towards compensation was an innovative and long-overdue acknowledgement of the wrongs done to Maori, an initiative that would be renewed and improved when Labour next returned to office. Te Reo became an official language.

There were cultural splits within Labour. Sometimes these were bridged, as with Kirk's worked-at relationship with the labour movement and Tom Skinner, analysed by Grant. But Kirk's conservatism on what one might label the politics of the body, including abortion and homosexual law reform, was evident and antagonised young activists and many women who were attempting at the time to break into Labour's male elite stronghold and influence policy. However, important advances were made on the position of women, despite the faults of Labour's superannuation scheme, which did not cater for the unwaged. There was the Report of the Select Committee on the Role of Women in New Zealand in 1975, New Zealand's involvement in International Women's Year activities, legislation on matrimonial property and the removal of the sex distinction for the residence rights of New Zealanders who married foreigners.⁹ And Kirk's enthusiasm for young people's efforts to find new and alternative ways of living was demonstrated in his Ohu policy, 'a story of idealism against bureaucracy, naiveté against political realities, weakness against power'.¹⁰

Kirk's weakness was economics. When the oil crisis struck with its reversal of the terms of trade he insisted that the Party honour its election promises when some might well have been diminished in scale or abandoned altogether. Bill Rowling, Kirk's Finance Minister, did not always have an easy time, although none of his experiences before Kirk died were to match the difficulties of afterwards when, as Kirk's successor, he had to face the belligerent Robert Muldoon across the House and the nation.

Norman Kirk's death, after a mere 21 months in office as New Zealand's fourth Labour Prime Minister, shocked and dismayed New Zealanders of every political persuasion. Kirk himself would have been even more shocked had he known that his party was to have such a brief period in power. He had led, for much of its time, a second, one-term Labour Government, echoing the Walter Nash-led regime that took office in 1957, ironically the year in which Kirk himself was first elected to the marginal seat of Lyttleton.

Towards the end of his book Grant quotes Norman Kirk thus:

People want order without necessary restriction or representation, opportunity without abuse and a free and lively society without disorder (p. 433, unsourced).

Kirk here expresses his view of a good polity. As Grant says, Norman Kirk was 'no radical ideologue' (p. 433). He was in many ways deeply conservative. Like everyone he was also deeply flawed. But he was a leader who had principles and moral purpose, and he was not afraid to express these and act on them, as this book capably demonstrates.

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¹ Margaret Hayward, *Diary of the Kirk Years*, Cape Catley and Reed, Queen Charlotte Sound and Wellington, 1981.

² Jim Eagles and Colin James, *The Making of a New Zealand Prime Minister*, Cheshire, Wellington, 1973; and Tony Garnier, Bruce Kohn and Pat Booth, *The Hunter and the Hill: New Zealand Politics in the Kirk Years*, Cassell, Auckland, 1978.

³ Hugh Templeton, in Margaret Clark, ed., 'Muldoon and Parliament', *Muldoon Revisited*, Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 2004, p. 31.

⁴ Robert Chapman, 'The 1969 Election', in Elizabeth McLeay, ed., *New Zealand Politics and Social Patterns: Selected Works by Robert Chapman*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1999, p. 170.

⁵ Keith Eunson, 'Norman Eric Kirk', in *Mirrors on the Hill: Reflections on New Zealand's Political Leaders*, Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 2001, p. 137.

⁶ Keith Eunson, 'Norman Eric Kirk', in *Mirrors on the Hill: Reflections on New Zealand's Political Leaders*, Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 2001, p. 133.

⁷ See the recent article by Ken Ross who argues for Kirk's 'pre-eminence' on overseas issues: 'Norman Kirk's Global Diplomacy', *New Zealand International Review*, 39:2 (March/April 2014), pp. 6-9.

⁸ See the interesting chapter by Michael Hirshfeld comparing the 1957-1960 and 1972-1975 Labour governments: 'Retrospect: Labour Now and Then', in Ray Goldstein with Roderic Alley, eds., *Labour in Power: Promise and Performance*, Price Milburn for New Zealand University Press, Wellington, pp. 11-18.

⁹ See also Irene Webley, 'The Status of Women' in Ray Goldstein with Rod Alley eds., *Labour in Power: Promise and Performance*, Price Milburn for New Zealand University Press, Wellington, pp. 126-35.

¹⁰ Lyman Tower Sargent, 'The Ohu Movement in New Zealand: An Experiment in Government Sponsorship of Communal Living in the 1970s', *Communal Societies*, 19 (1999), p. 50.