

# Who was G.W. Rusden

## *and does it matter?*

WILLIAM RENWICK

The first of these questions is the easier to answer. George William Rusden was a Victorian man of letters in both the imperial and the colonial senses of the phrase. He was born in the same year as Queen Victoria – 1819 – and he outlived her by two years. Except for the years 1882–92, when he was in London, he lived in Melbourne from the founding of the colony of Victoria in 1851 until he died in 1903.

His life was typical of sons of Anglican clergy born to the status of gentleman without the inherited financial means to sustain it. The uncertainty increased for him in 1833 when his parents uprooted themselves from England. Rusden's entry in *The Australian Dictionary of Biography* creates a perhaps unnecessary sense of mystery when it records: '[The] Rev G.K. Rusden had to leave his spacious home and private school at Leith Hill Place [Surrey] and migrated with his wife and ten of his children to New South Wales to join his eldest son Francis'. Rusden's father became one of Marsden's curates, living at Maitland in the Hunter Valley until he died in 1859.

G.W. Rusden became a dedicated correspondent but in his large collection of personal papers there is virtually no mention of his early life. Clearly, however, his father and mother laid the moral and intellectual foundations on which he built for the rest of his lifetime. The exacting morality can be inferred from the last sentences of the last sermon his father wrote: 'Let us take up our cross, and follow Christ. Let us in any trial and danger, hold fast our integrity. Let us not fear them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear Him, who is able to destroy both soul and body in Hell'. Rusden's father was a man of strong – his critics said inflexible – views, and both George Rusden and his younger brother Henry Keylock Rusden were similarly fearless, though poles apart in their convictions. George became an ardent Anglican, a pillar of the



Melbourne establishment. According to one of his close acquaintances, he was 'a violent Tory in everything except where natives were concerned' and 'even more violent as an advocate'. His brother became an atheist and one of the leading free thinkers in the colony. Both were forceful controversialists.

From his early 20s George Rusden was expressing his views in the Maitland and Sydney newspapers, usually under various pseudonyms, and his earliest pieces already had the stamp of his later writings: they gave the appearance of being well informed and authoritative, they were clearly and firmly expressed, and there was no mistaking his point of view. He was also a versifier: his papers preserve many poems in various forms, and ballads, parodies and squibs on topical issues. He clearly thought of himself as a literary man with aspirations to become a local sage. His parents had given him a sound preparation in the classics and he was fluent in French.

Above: G.W. Rusden c1885.  
*Royal Historical Society of Victoria.*

He read voraciously and had great powers of memory: he had, he once said, the plays of Shakespeare almost by heart before he was 15. Shakespeare, Tacitus, and the Bible were his literary and moral icons.

Literary interests were all very well but Rusden had to make his way in the world. On the voyage out he had been befriended by Charles (later Sir Charles) Nicholson, who was wealthy, a man of letters, a pastoralist, and a leading public figure. He recruited Rusden as a jackaroo, and the young man was soon managing some of Nicholson's sheep runs in the Hunter Valley. But, as he approached his thirtieth birthday, Rusden despaired of making his fortune from the land. He went to Canton in 1847, where a brother-in-law had commercial interests, and where, on a later visit, he would meet General Charles Gordon – Chinese Gordon, the future martyr of Khartoum, who would become one of Rusden's friends and one of his heroes. But the prospects of a clerk in a Canton counting house did not excite him and he returned to Sydney intending to study for the Bar. We can surmise that his parents had regretted migrating to Maitland: by getting rich as soon as he could, Rusden hoped to be able to settle them in England once again. His own sense of loss and alienation, as we shall see, was also acute.

Instead of taking up law, Rusden became a government official, first in New South Wales, then, from 1851, in the infant colony of Victoria, where he held a string of senior administrative positions. In 1856, when Victoria became self-governing, he was appointed Clerk of the Parliaments and Clerk of the Legislative Council, and he held that post until he retired in 1882. He was a foundation member of the Board of National Education, on which he served for ten years, and of the Council of the University of Melbourne, of which he was a member for more than thirty. He played a prominent part in the life of the Anglican Church. He was for several years a member of the Brighton Municipal Council in the well-to-do seaside suburb where he lived, and mayor for three years. He was one of the first members of the Melbourne Club, whose entrance fee of 40 guineas made it the preserve of the colony's wealthy and influential men. He did not marry. He was devoted to his sister Georgina Mary, who lived with him and kept house until she died in 1868.

Despite the demands of his active public life Rusden was also a man for his library. There, in the mind, he lived the life of a Victorian man of letters. He read widely and kept himself well informed on the various subjects of interest to literary men in England. He was also a compulsive writer and, in addition to keeping up a large correspondence, usually had something on the go for publication. As time went on, his knowledge of Australia and Australian life became formidable and so, too, were his views on what the colonial experience amounted to. When Anthony Trollope published his *Australia and New*

*Zealand* in 1873 he was particularly anxious to know Rusden's opinion of it. Trollope had spent a good deal of time with Rusden during his visit to Victoria and knew the kind of man he was dealing with. 'I am more afraid of your criticism than of any other', Trollope wrote to him, because 'you thoroughly understand the subject and are critical by nature'.

By the time Trollope got to know him the critical side of Rusden's nature was beginning to dominate his responses. He was hostile to the democratic tendencies of the time both as he experienced them in Victoria and as he read and heard about them in England. He believed that he was living in a declining civilisation, and he deplored what he saw as the lack of integrity in statesmen of the day who were leading the Empire down a path of shame and ignominy. He was, as his writings show, experiencing a double alienation.

His first sense of it had arisen from the fact that he was no longer living in England. It is clearly to be seen in the concluding stanzas of *Moyarra: An Australian Legend*, the 70-page epic poem Rusden drummed out in his head during his lonely youthful years in the bush, with, as he later wrote, 'no other companion but my faithful Australian, my dog, and my horse'. The Australians of the epic are Aboriginals. Rusden had developed a great respect for the Aboriginal Australians he lived among, and became proficient in the local language. *Moyarra* is a poem of love, faithfulness and heroism, but when the tragedy is played out the poet speaks directly to his reader. There is the Christian promise of heaven, with:

*The great, the good, from every clime  
Gathered triumphant over Time.*

But his own condition, there in the outback at the age of 20 or 21, was more equivocal. His aboriginal heroes are:

*Heirs of the land where I must pine  
Reflecting that it is not mine.*

He has to live with 'the sad truth that here I am a stranger in the land'. He finds some comfort in the moon, which he loves the more because it 'revisits England's shore'. And that gives him the greater hope that the glory of England will suffuse and enlighten the land where he now lives:

*Shades of my fathers! haunting yet  
Each object of my fond regret; ...  
Say, can your spells pervade this distant clime,  
Alike victorious over space and time?*

The poem ends with the poet accepting that his own sense 'of pleasure lost' will be forever, and that only intensifies his invocation to his home land:

*Oh! in the councils of my father-land  
Instil the wisdom which may keep it free,  
Great, glorious, wonder of the nations: so shall be  
Your benison wafted o'er the circling sea  
To hearts which, faithful still, revere your sacred band.*

The good, the great, national glory, Britain the wonder of the nations – these were the lights by which the young Rusden lived, and he prayed that, with statesmen who were noble of purpose, they would add to their lustre in his generation.

His belief in English virtues was still lyrically intact in 1854 – he was 35 – when he gave a public lecture in Melbourne to mark the opening of the Exhibition Building. Taking for his subject 'Gathering Together for the Good of Work and Learning', he placed England and its new colony, Victoria, in the sweep of world history. Modern England was the result of a gathering together from many countries and races which, through the centuries, had produced 'the energy ... to carry out the principles ... which all admit have made us great'. He was confident that the settlers of Victoria would prove themselves 'worthy of the stock from which they had sprung'. So long as they kept to 'the principles on which the national freedom and greatness' of England had been reared, 'we shall have done not only all that lies in our power, but the greatest good that it was possible to do'.

He was soon disappointed. Rusden's view of the world was shattered by the gold rushes and the rapid democratisation of politics in Victoria and, in England, by extensions of the franchise and the demagoguery of Gladstone, whom he came to hate, and Disraeli, whom he despised. By 1871, when he was 52, his pride in his homeland had curdled into equally ardent disillusionment. He published a pamphlet on *The Discovery and Settlement of Port Phillip* and took the opportunity in his dedicatory introduction to Anthony Trollope to attack the politics of Little England. 'Has patriotism been altogether dispossessed by cotton?', he asked. He recalled with pride and thanks the younger Pitt who, in the wake of the loss of the American colonies, had held the Empire together. 'He was not the head of a party which was moved by its tail', he wrote, with evident reference to Pitt's current successors. Many colonies had been lost in the past or even made hostile 'by the effrontery or incapacity of the men in power in the mother-country. Many a folly has been perpetrated in a colony to which unwisdom in the mother country has given permanence'. There, in two sentences, is the mordant idea that Rusden would elaborate in his *History of New Zealand*.

Rusden spent 1874 in London where, thanks to Trollope's kindly help, he was made a member of the Garrick Club and enjoyed the life of a man of letters. Trollope and others encouraged him to write a history of Australia and, once he got started on it, he found himself writing a history of New Zealand as well. Between 1875 and 1882 he researched and wrote two three-volume histories. It was an amazing feat of industry, for he remained Clerk of the Parliaments until the end of 1881, by which time both books were virtually completed. Both

were reasonably well noticed in London on their publication in 1883, but his *History of New Zealand* became a cause célèbre in New Zealand before disappearing from public notice.

So, does Rusden matter? Different people have given different answers.

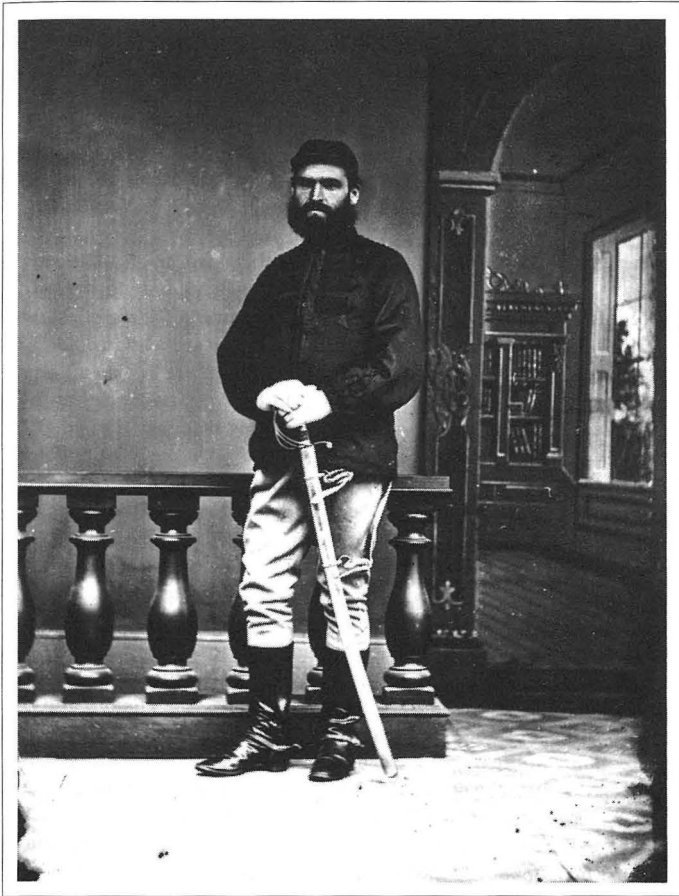
Rusden came to matter to several of the colony's leading men while he was writing his *History*. One after another, Grey, Swainson, Fenton, Mantell, Weld, and Governors Robinson and Gordon received inquiring letters from Rusden as his researches raised questions for which he sought their personal answers. They were all impressed with his grasp of the published official records and his evident wish to write an accurate, fair, and balanced history.

Grey, Gordon and Mantell went far beyond the courtesies Rusden might have expected. Grey insisted that he be his guest at Kawau, where he and Rusden could talk at leisure and where Rusden was given free run of his copious library. Grey was premier at the time of Rusden's visit and he arranged for John Sheehan, his Native Minister, to accompany Rusden on a tour of Auckland, Thames, Tauranga, Rotorua and the Waikato, where he walked over the battlefield of Orakau with Rewi Maniapoto. Through Grey's good offices, too, Rusden entered into a highly privileged correspondence with Sir Arthur Gordon during his governorship, which encompassed the sack of Parihaka. Gordon also invited him to be his guest and allowed him to read and take notes from official despatches held in Government House.

Of his New Zealand sources, however, none was to match Walter Mantell in importance. They met briefly during Rusden's visit to Wellington in August 1881, were immediately conscious of a common bond of sympathy on Maori issues, and entered into a regular correspondence that ended with Mantell's death in 1895.

Rusden's history revealed itself to be uncompromisingly philo-Maori, and this mattered to the humanitarian party in the colony and their backers in Britain. Their influence had been declining since the beginning of the Waitara war. They were comforted to find in Rusden an historian who accurately recounted what they had sought to achieve and who unflinchingly exposed policies that had become so destructive of Maori life. As Rusden told it, New Zealand history since the European invasion was the record of a struggle between upright men who strove to uphold Maori rights and weak or unscrupulous men whose actions consciously or unconsciously subverted them.

The heroes were Marsden, Tamati Waka Nene, Swainson, Selwyn, Martin, Te Waharoa, Te Rangitake, and Mantell, and of these only Swainson and Mantell were still alive in 1883. The main culprits in the colony were C.W. Richmond, McLean, and Whitaker. They had



led Governor Gore Browne astray and, with him, were responsible for the Waitara war, the turning point in the protection of Maori rights under the Treaty and the root cause of the later wars. McLean had perhaps redeemed himself later as Native Minister but new villains had emerged in Prendergast and Bryce.

Mantell thought Rusden's account 'wonderful' as far as it went. His chief regret was that it could not go quite far enough, but it was not Rusden's fault that important facts were not to be found in the printed records. Swainson was also appreciative but added a magisterial qualification: 'Severe as they are, the censures would have been more effective if they had been less sweeping'. Hugh Carleton approved the work generally and particularly liked Rusden's treatment of Henry Williams. Maning agreed with the interpretation of traditional Maori land rights. Fenton, though he came for some criticism in the

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Above: Lieutenant John Bryce of the Kai Iwi Cavalry in 1868.  
Harding Denton Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library.

book, had a favourable opinion.

But to the generation that had lived through the four decades since the signing of the Treaty, a book that pleased the humanitarians was most unlikely to be welcomed by the local leaders of settler opinion. As soon as the book arrived in New Zealand they saw that it must matter to them. Not until Alister Taylor published *Under The Plum Tree* nearly a century later was there such a public uproar. The book, Mantell reported to Rusden, had raised a 'howl of indignation' and was almost universally held up for execration as 'a — libel on the colony'. Despite, however, 'screams of outraged virtue', there was only one episode, he said, that was 'stigmatised as false'. That was the part that the then Native Minister, John Bryce, had played in the raid on Handley's woolshed, Nukumara, during the war against Titokowaru in 1868. The official account had praised Lieutenant Bryce and others of the Kai Iwi Cavalry for gallantly putting a party of Hau Hau to flight. Rusden said it was a brutal assault on women and children who were 'cut down gleefully and with ease' by Bryce and another cavalryman. This he based on an account provided for him by Sir Arthur Gordon who had it from Bishop Hadfield. But the gleeful embellishment was Rusden's own literary flourish.

Bryce sued for libel, claiming damages of £10,000. After many delays, Rusden was tried by jury before the Queen's Bench Division of the High Court in London in March 1886. Rusden's New Zealand lawyer told him that he would have stood no chance before a New Zealand jury, so great was the animus. He fared no better in London. The trial lasted eight days. The Judge took three hours to sum up, and then directed the jury that the words complained of were a libel. The jury needed less than fifteen minutes to reach its verdict: guilty, damages £5000. Rusden, *The Times* noted, had been 'severely mulcted'. His publisher, Chapman and Hall, had stopped distributing the book in 1884. The Court decision confirmed their commercial prudence. The price of Rusden's *History of New Zealand* immediately increased on the London second-hand book market.

Rusden appealed the decision. But the best he could achieve in a second appearance in court, during which he conducted his own defence, was a reduction of the fine to £2531, plus his own costs of about £1100. Cleared now of his legal restraints, Rusden published two more

books in vindication. *Aureretanga: Groans of the Maori*, which he edited and published in 1888, put together in book-form the annotated documents he had prepared for counsel for his defence in *Bryce v Rusden, Tragedies in New Zealand History in 1868 and 1881. Discussed in England in 1886 and 1887*, he published privately, also in 1888. It includes Baron Huddleston's summing up in *Bryce v Rusden*, Rusden's rejoinder, evidence taken in New Zealand, and speeches by counsel. In 1889 he reissued the History with 21 lines of asterisks where the libellous text had been.

Rusden's defeat mattered as much to his antagonists in the colony as it did to the humiliated historian. He had been shown to be wrong in what he said about Bryce and the book had been suppressed, so what credence could be placed on his other indictments? It was not as a historian of the colony but as the other name in one of New Zealand's most celebrated trials that Rusden would have a place in New Zealand history. It is, for example, in the section on 'some notable libel trials' that he is mentioned in *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, 1966.

In the second to last letter he wrote to Rusden, Mantell reverted once again to the *History*. Rusden, he said, had written 'a partisan history ... , and some day, as a matter of course, a partisan will arise on the other side who will be quite as unfair to the objects of your generation, as you have been to us - And then at last the dispassionate student will perhaps have before him material for forming a just opinion on our early past'.

Mantell was overly sanguine. The debate was never joined. In 1895 Rusden published a revised and expanded *History of New Zealand*. Three years later, in *The Long White Cloud*, Pember Reeves did not dispute his views but declared him, in effect, not to be part of the debate. 'Of Rusden's *History*', he wrote in his bibliography, 'no one doubts the honest intent. The author, believing the Maori to be a noble, valiant, and persecuted race, befriended by the missionaries and those who took missionary advice, and robbed and cheated by almost all others, says so in three long, vehement, sincere but not fascinating volumes, largely composed of extracts from public papers and speeches.... The volumes have their use, but are not a history of New Zealand.'

That was also the implied verdict of historians for the next fifty years, who ignored Rusden's *History*. Lindsay Buick set the tone of what became the prevailing interpretation of relationships between Pakeha and Maori. On the last page of his *Treaty of Waitangi*, first published in 1914, he wrote: 'At no time has the legislature been callously unmindful of the true spirit of the treaty, or careless of the great trust imposed upon it as the guardian of native rights'. But to this, as if feeling a pang of conscience, he added the following footnote: 'The confiscations of Taranaki lands following upon the Wait-

ara War might be held by some to be the exception to the rule, but that would depend upon the view taken of the justification for the war. The breaches of the treaty, real or alleged, which have occurred in connection with the Waitara war and since, have been vigorously stated by Mr G.W. Rusden in his *Aureretanga*, published in 1888'.

Rusden failed even to rate a footnote in other histories. James Hight's *Cambridge History of New Zealand*, 1933, and J.B. Condliffe's *New Zealand in the Making*, 1930, both have detailed bibliographies but Rusden's works are not in them. And it was not only Rusden who failed to get a mention in the volume Hight edited. Maori-Pakeha relationships in the 1870s are also invisible: Te Whiti, Tohu, Parihaka, and Bryce are not mentioned. Condliffe had the benefit of Sir Apirana Ngata, and Dr Peter Buck as advisers, and his discussion of what he calls 'Pakeha aggression' over land is the most balanced account written during that period. Unaccountably, however, in *The Short History of New Zealand*, which he and Willis Airey published in 1935, the arrest of Te Whiti and the destruction of Parihaka are described as 'a burlesque at which the whole colony laughed'. Not only Rusden but the moral outrage of Parihaka was being written out of New Zealand history.

Since the second world war, Rusden has come to matter slightly more to historians. The *History* and the *Aureretanga* are listed in the bibliographies of most of the more recent specialised studies on aspects of the seventy years from Marsden to Parihaka and its aftermath. Some historians - Keith Sinclair, Ian Wards, D.K. Fieldhouse, Alan Ward, and Hazel Riseborough, for example - have made critical use of his text in some aspects of their own interpretations. But the suspicion has remained that Rusden was, in A.H. McLintock's phrase, 'an enthusiastic but bitterly prejudiced amateur'. One exception, however, was T.G. Wilson, who, in his *Landfall* article 'The Writing of History in New Zealand', published in 1957, suggested that Rusden's *History* deserved more consideration than it had received.

There are some recent signs of that happening, and there are two reasons why it should. The first has to do with the historiography of Maori-Pakeha relationships. With notable exceptions, the post-war decades of the nineteenth century were slower to receive as much scholarly attention as the early years of contact, the Crown colony period, the origins of the wars of the sixties, and the wars themselves. The balance is now being redressed. The earlier studies by Dick Scott, Keith Sorrenson, David Hamer, Alan Ward, Russell Stone and Ann Parsonson have recently been joined by Raewyn Dalziel's biography of Vogel, Tim McIvor's of Ballance, Hazel Riseborough's *Days of Darkness*, and Keith Sinclair's *Kinds of Peace*. To these will soon be added Judith Binney's study of Te Kooti.

The second reason is the climate of ideas within which New Zealand historians have been living and working during the last decade or so. The rediscovery of the Treaty of Waitangi as a solemn compact has opened the entire sweep of Maori-Pakeha relationships since 1840 to revision and re-interpretation. The Waitangi Tribunal is unlocking numerous hapu histories of their encounters with Pakeha, particularly over tribal lands. The cumulative effect, Keith Sorrenson suggests, will be a radical reinterpretation of New Zealand history, the beginnings of which are also to be found in Claudia Orange's *The Treaty of Waitangi* and in Paul McHugh's researches.

These developments mean that opinions about Rusden's *History* should also be reviewed and perhaps revised. I am not suggesting that it will be found to be an unjustly neglected masterpiece – it has too many shortcomings for that. But I think it likely that historians of the present day will find more to commend in his interpretation than Pakeha historians of earlier generations have.

Pember Reeves was justified as a reader in criticising Rusden's excessive quotations from official papers and debates. But Rusden had his own reasons. One of his aims was to let the leading figures in his drama speak for themselves; and he did so because he was convinced from his reading of what had already been published that the truth was already being replaced by self-serving accounts. William Fox's *The War in New Zealand* he cited as a case in point. Among other things, Rusden was our first revisionist.

Reeves was on more dubious ground when he declared that Rusden's book was not a history. Histories, as Reeves himself was to demonstrate, can take different forms. Rusden's great model was Tacitus, who saw it as 'History's highest function to let no worthy action be uncommended and to hold out the reprobation of posterity on evil words and deeds'. William Stubbs, Regius Professor at Oxford, with his minute recording of constitutional change, was one of Rusden's contemporary exemplars. It was, as Mantell noted, 'a *political history*' that Rusden had written; almost everything else had been left out.

In Isaiah Berlin's typology of hedgehogs and foxes, Rusden was indisputably a hedgehog. He knew one big thing, and that gave point and purpose to his *History*. Britain had in 1840 entered into a solemn treaty with the Maori which her statesmen were in duty bound to honour. Until the passing of the New Zealand Constitution Act in 1852, colonial secretaries, with some regrettable exceptions, had done their duty. But after 1852, with settler politicians increasingly in control, Maori rights under the Treaty had been ignored and eroded and then deliberately set aside and trampled on. What was

climactic about Parihaka was not only the New Zealand government's actions in contravention of the Treaty but Britain's refusal to protect her Treaty partner by rebuking the Hall-Whitaker government and disallowing, as repugnant to British law, the various Acts relating to the Parihaka crisis. Britain was dishonoured with its colony.

That is the theme of Rusden's history. It is developed, with mounting anger, through 1700 pages of dense, unrelenting detail, and therein lies its crippling defect. Very few readers will have read Rusden from cover to cover and, as one who has, I can well understand Pember Reeves's ambivalence. Rusden was an obsessive personality, and in his determination to sheet home every fact and expose every conspiracy and cover-up, he defeated his own purpose. Only by reading the whole work can you get the full force of his insistent argument. But readers will no doubt continue to go to Rusden, as they would to an encyclopedia, to see what he has to say about this or that episode, not to trace his argument from beginning to end. That is a pity because, with all its faults, Rusden's *History* is the first and still our most radical philo-Maori history. Opinions, for which he was reviled in the 1880s have become orthodoxies in the 1990s.

There is a portent of rehabilitation, too, in Peter Gibbons's recent survey of the history of our non-fiction writing. Rusden's 'greatest offence', he concludes, 'was in not conforming to the accepted [settler] ideology' when he published. Gibbons goes further. He finds in the interpretations of W.B. Sutch, Tony Simpson and Dick Scott a 'leftist critique' which 'is essentially a moral history', and he places it in 'what might be called "the Rusden tradition" of relations between Maori and Pakeha'. Rusden would have agreed about the prevailing settler ideology, but he deplored liberal interpretations and he would have lambasted leftist critiques. The arch-Tory is a suitable case for historiographical treatment.

#### NOTES ON SOURCES

My main sources for this piece have been Rusden's published writings, letters and personal papers in the collections of Rusden's papers in The Leeper Library, Trinity College, University of Melbourne, and in The Royal Historical Society of Victoria, Melbourne, and Rusden's letters to Walter Mantell in the Mantell Papers, Alexander Turnbull Library. A selection of material relating to New Zealand in the Rusden Papers in The Leeper Library was made by Ray Grover in 1969 and is held on microfilm in the Turnbull.

*From a seminar at the Stout Research Centre on 9 June 1993.*

*William Renwick is writing a book on Rusden and New Zealand history.*