

Peter Fraser: Master Politician

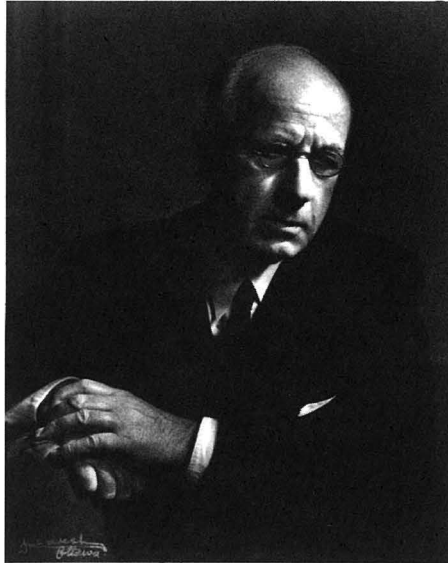
Margaret Clark (Ed), The Dunmore Press, 1998, \$29.95

EARLIER THIS YEAR I conducted a survey among academics and other leaders in their fields asking them to give their appraisal of New Zealand's Prime Ministers according to the extent to which they made a positive contribution to the history of the country. From the replies I was able to establish a ranking of the Prime Ministers, from greatest to least effective.

It was no surprise that Richard Seddon finished in first place. But I was intrigued by the runner up. It was not the beloved Michael Joseph Savage, nor the inspiring Norman Kirk, or the long serving Sir Keith Holyoake. It was Peter Fraser. His statue now stands nearby Seddon's, in the garden of the Victoria University Law School, facing the Parliament to which he dedicated so much of his life.

The respect in which Fraser was held by the respondents to my survey is confirmed by the contributors to a new biography, *Peter Fraser: Master Politician*, the first serious treatment of the subject since the book by James Thorn in 1952. Edited by Margaret Clark of the School of Political Science and

International Relations at Victoria University, the book is derived from a conference held in August 1997, part of a series being conducted by



A portrait, by Karsh of Ottawa, presented to Peter Fraser by the Polish members of the Australasian-Polish Society in 1944, with the inscription: 'We express our deep and most sincere gratitude for your generous help to Polish children during the most tragic time in our history'.

the Stout Research Centre appraising the contribution of key political leaders to New Zealand history. It makes a better read than the book of the first conference, devoted to Sir Keith Holyoake, simply because

Fraser made more important decisions in more interesting times than Holyoake ever did.

Congratulations are due to the organisers of the conference for their diligence in assembling a roster of speakers capable of providing such a broad spectrum of perspectives on Fraser. This multi-faceted approach pays dividends in that it reflects the depth of Fraser's character and the breadth of his contribution to New Zealand history.

The first three phases of Fraser's political career are discussed; from early socialist firebrand, to key lieutenant in the first Labour Government, to wartime Prime Minister and international statesman at the founding of the United Nations. Perhaps missing was some focus on a depiction of, and explanation for, the final phase of his career, the increasing conservatism of his last term of office, particularly his relationship with the trade union movement. This was a more significant aspect of his legacy than the nature of his relationship with John A.

Lee, the subject of a chapter by Erik Olssen.

As is common in a forum such as that provided by the Stout Centre conference, the most fascinating contributions were made by contemporaries of Fraser who provided

first hand accounts of their personal experiences living and working with him. Martyn Finlay, who served in caucus with Fraser during his last term as Prime Minister, talks of Fraser the politician. Colin Aikman and Tom Larkin, officials who travelled with him on diplomatic missions overseas, describe Fraser the statesman. Alice Kemp Fraser, Peter Fraser's grand-step-daughter, depicts Fraser the family man (according to her, the Prime Minister of New Zealand had one glass eye. Imagine that being kept a secret today!). Supporting this is a chapter by Hilary Stace noting the contribution made by Fraser's wife Janet to his career. This helps us peek behind the façade of the dour, austere, even cold figure history usually presents to us of Fraser. The simple statement that 'he was never

the same without Janet' helps emphasise the simple humanity underlying his beliefs and decisions.

The other chapters are more conventional historical accounts. Some of them rely heavily on reports written by one contemporary source being brought to light. This is especially noticeable in Michael Ashby's contribution on Fraser's foreign policy and Brian Easton's rather scrappy chapter on Fraser and the development of the nation-building state. There is a well-balanced presentation of Fraser's accomplishments in separate chapters describing his contribution to education policy (William Renwick), his attitude towards advancing Maori interests (Claudia Orange), and his achievements as war-time Prime Minister (Ian Wards). Michael King's chapter

on the origins of his early radicalism provides a sneak preview of the major biography of Fraser which he began and Michael Bassett (another contributor to this book) will finish.

Peter Fraser: Master Politician is a pleasant synthesis of a wide variety of perspectives on Fraser and a very useful addition to New Zealand's political and historical literature. It could be used as a source for research on a specific aspect of his career but, unusually for the genre, it is very easy to read. In portraying the man it is in total greater than the sum of its parts. It should appeal to both the specialist and the general reader. ☞

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 COMMENTARY

by Brian Easton

Remembering Peter Fraser

This paper was originally given at a New Zealand Book Council seminar on 'Peter Fraser: Master Politician', 29 July, 1998.

THERE IS AN EASTON family tradition that when Peter Fraser was a carpenter in Auckland, he stayed with my great-grandfather when he came to Wellington on Red Fed business. Perhaps it is an exaggeration: he might have stayed once, or called in on a visit. The connection seems to have continued, for the tradition claims that as Prime Minister Fraser attended my grandfather's funeral. Fraser was a regular attender of funerals so that is possible too.

My father seems to have distanced himself from Fraser. I think it was probably the expulsion of John A. Lee from the Labour Party. Erik Olssen's contribution to *Peter Fraser: Master Politician* is historically accurate – distinguishing itself from much of the other commentary. Perhaps historicity has long been irrelevant, for the expulsion has the mythical status of the moment when Labour chose a path of cooperation with capitalism, rather than of socialism (a myth

hardly touched by the fact that Lee seems to have been a monetary reformer rather than a socialist). My attitude – indeed that of much of my generation – was even more formed by what was seen to be a second betrayal, the conscription referendum. But as David Grant shows, Fraser was never a classic conscientious objector despite being jailed during the First World War. And to round the intergenerational story off, I asked my son 'who was Peter Fraser?'. He replied 'is this a trick question?', thought a bit, and asked cautiously 'was he a Prime Minister?'. Thus in five generations of the Easton family Fraser cycled