

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

from being an almost unheard of non-entity with potential, to an almost forgotten entity of realised potential.

There are some inconsistencies in the Easton family accounts of Fraser. Even my generation knew there was an anomaly, for we described him as 'our greatest Minister of Education'. We resolved it, by saying that it was really Clarence Beeby, although Bill Renwick's essay shows he had independently come to his educational views before he met Beeb. My views were further disturbed when I attended a Book Council lecture in the early 1980s, in which Michael King read the first chapter of what will be the Bassett-King biography. (If the rest is only half as good as that chapter it is going to be a great book). Also attending was a number of ex-diplomats, who were there to ensure that their hero was not misrepresented. Fraser a 'hero', a foreign affairs 'hero'? Wasn't he a cold warrior? There are several essays in the book which contribute to my understanding Fraser as a foreign policy moralist. I am especially glad the book republished the Alistair McIntosh paper, which deserves to be more widely known, while the others all support his account. Fraser's contribution to the formation of the Trusteeship council is one of those proud moments in New Zealand's foreign policy history, along with Bill Sutch's part in the foundation of UNICEF. Is there a book on 'great moments in New Zealand's foreign policy'?

In summary, *Peter Fraser: Master Politician*, is a valuable step towards a re-evaluation of Fraser as he

moves from the status of a living politician to an historical one. He is not alone: we have recently had published important biographies of John Ballance and Edward Stafford, plus the conference essays on *Keith Holyoake: Towards a Political Biography*. Of the four, the Stout Centre has been proudly associated with three, plus the forthcoming study of Robert Muldoon. (In passing we desperately need a decent biography of Bill Massey and also a new one on Dick Seddon. And despite Judith Basset's study, we need to re-evaluate Harry Atkinson). Let me finish by listing three issues which need further consideration.

The first I deal with briefly is that covered by my essay: economic policy and economic performance. I could not really find any evidence for Fraser's economics leadership. On the basis of what I have seen I am inclined to think he was led – he took advice. That can not be quite right, because he had a conservative economic stance by the time he became a minister, more so than Lee for instance. Frustratingly the period of the 1940s is just beyond that of modern economic history scholarship, because the data base only gets reliable from the mid-1950s. Yet the economic performance of New Zealand under Fraser (and Savage) was one of the most outstanding, challenged only by the Seddon period. The available works are disappointingly inadequate: Jack Baker's *War Economy* is the best. Keith Sinclair's *Walter Nash* is frustratingly light on economic policy. My guess is that the best chance we have of recovering the economics of the period would be a

good history of the Treasury which is likely to shed further light on the central role of Bernard Ashwin, and the interaction with his ministers.

The second issue is the tension between Fraser, the cold warrior, and the supporters of nuclear disarmament. I can only offer my generation's perspective here. It saw nuclear weapons as so fundamentally changing the nature of international politics, that traditional great power rivalry, such as that post-war between the Soviet and the US, was no longer relevant. However, nuclear arms interacted so strongly with the cold war, that it has never been possible to separate the two debates – or not possible until the end of the Soviet Empire from 1989. The question that Fraser poses for me is: if he had been my generation, what would have been his foreign policy stance? The import is that he was no more, nor less, moral than we were, but he was applying his morality in a different situation. Or, was his foreign policy vision laced more with a Realpolitik? What would be his position today on, say, East Timor? As such questions are hypothetical and a-historical, and I am not looking for slick answers, like Fraser would have been a 'rogernome' had he led the Labour government in the 1980s. What I am concerned with is the standoff between the two sides of our foreign policy debate. I see in these essays the possibility of using Fraser as a way into understanding the conflict between the two views, and even reconciling them.

My third issue is an uncomfortable one, but it must be faced. There

is nothing in the book which changes my generation's image of Fraser as a first class political thug, who used his power brutally where he thought it was in the best interests of the nation as judged by himself. It was an image symbolised by the Lee expulsion, by the conscription referendum, and by some of the industrial relations disputes, but there are related minor other incidents of his life handed down from other fathers to other sons. They could be explained by the circumstances. Here was Fraser leading a country at war, and he had to deal with various dissenters including Leeites and communists (although this latter element is still shadowy). War leadership involves desperate measures, and so a higher

level of political thuggery. Thus is Fraser's justified, more than that of his successor Sid Holland? Moreover, beneath it all, there was a more liberal story. Conscientious objectors were treated more tolerantly in the Second World War than in the First, apparently partly as a result of Fraser. 'Guilt' snorted my generation. But were we not reared on the Fraser-Beeby principles? Do we not support the cultural life he promoted? Did he not detest racism as we do? Was he not almost a feminist as much as a man could be of his time, perhaps as a part of love and respect for that strong woman Janet Fraser? (Hillary Stace's contribution is another jewel in this book). And was not our commitment for a moral foreign policy

founded on his earlier one?

I know my family inheritance from the Eastons, even though I knew neither my grandfather nor great-grandfather. But I know also I have an intellectual inheritance from Peter Fraser. I remain unsure what it is, but this book gives me clues, and stimulates me to think about them. Which is all we should ask of a book. ✉

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Notes

- 1 The presentation text included: 'He may even have lived in sin (as was the quaint terminology of his day) with Janet before her divorce came through'. However Hillary Stace assures me that subsequent research (based on addresses) almost certainly rules that possibility out.

BOOK REVIEW

by Edmund Bohan

Farewell Colonialism: The New Zealand International Exhibition, Christchurch, 1906-07

John Mansfield Thomson (ed), The Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 1998, \$39.95

THIS HANDSOMELY presented and superbly illustrated book of twelve essays by eleven different contributors had its genesis in the Stout Research Centre 1995 conference on the Christchurch Exhibition.

Surprisingly, given the significance of the Exhibition in our social and cultural history, that conference and this publication seem to have been the first to have studied the event in any satisfactory detail, for hitherto it has been comprehensively ignored in most of our

general histories. Perhaps if it had been held in Auckland that would not have been the case, but at least after this book such an extraordinary achievement will be ignored only by the most crass of future historians. Promoted by Seddon to display to the world New Zealand's 'distinctiveness and imminent greatness', the exhibition triumphantly celebrated the successes of an emergent nation and was visited and enjoyed by nearly two million people – nearly twice New Zealand's entire population in 1906.

Our first major international event, and a significant tourist attraction, was directly inspired by and modelled on the greatest and most influential of 19th-century exhibitions, as John Mansfield Thomson makes so admirably clear in the first brief essay: "'That Enchanted Pile": A Note on the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1851'. Jock Phillips, in 'Exhibiting Ourselves: The Exhibition and National Identity' follows with an analysis of the event as the 'national self-definition' of a young