

hold up the course of the fictional action.

There is an operatic dimension. One of those opera companies that Adrienne Simpson has so tirelessly researched is in town with Italianate performers, curious in behaviour and in name – a leading lady is called Gabriella Sabatini. After a while one feels the need to give even the New Zealand singer, Frances Grace, the benefits of an Italian pronunciation to her family name. Productions of *Maritana*, *Les Huguenots* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* are lovingly described. Here the author's special interests (he was an opera singer for a quarter of a century) do tend to get in the way of things, and readers less interested in operatic history than he, might feel that the plots of stageworks stand in the way of the novel's own plot – but only for a very few pages. The fluidity of the company – singers coming and going, rising and declining, falling ill and overcoming their weaknesses, and struggling through to the best possible performances in spite of it all – definitely add a dimension to the tale itself. The visits of certain singers to certain all-night houses reveal some of the underlying mystery and the element of uncertainty, so central to a mystery novel, is increased by the ups and downs of the opera company's fate.

The air of mystery is all-pervasive. It is not just a matter of whodunit but also of the private and even secret lives of many characters. Sexual misbehaviour, even perversion, is constantly hinted at; the veil is lifted and falls again before one has quite glimpsed what is behind it; highly respectable persons seem filled with highly sensual ill-will. It is a relief to contemplate the honest Irish love of the policeman for his Shannon girl – unfortunately murdered. In fact the least satisfactory thread in this interweave is the actual murder plot itself. Don't read this book for its ending, but do read it. There are lots of satisfactions and interesting curiosities along the way.

BOOK REVIEW

A very readable narrative

The Mother of All Departments: The History of the Department of Internal Affairs

Michael Bassett, Auckland University Press, 1997, pp.312.

Reviewed by John R. Martin

EVERY GOVERNMENT NEEDS ONE – a catch-all agency in which can reside those administrative chores which do not fit neatly into functional pigeon-holes. The British have the Home Office; the Australians the Department of Administrative Services. In New Zealand the Department of Internal Affairs has taken that role. It has been, in Sir Jack Hunn's phrase, a repository for 'waifs and strays'. But Internal Affairs also had the

distinction, as the Colonial Secretary's office from 1840, of being as Michael Bassett puts it 'the source of administrative power in the new land and the constitutional fount of bureaucratic authority'.² Hence, 'the Mother of all Departments'.

Over the decades since 1840 Internal Affairs has shed many functions and gained others. There have been times when its activities have been of high political salience. But for most of its history it has simply been a fixture in the machinery of government. Bassett has taken a vast amount of archival material and drawn from it a very readable narrative which illuminates some of the less frequently visited corners of the bureaucracy.

The Centennial publications of 1940 and the War Histories – both centred on Internal Affairs – made major contributions to New Zealand's institutional history. But for nearly 50 years after World War II the only substantial books on the history of public administration – there were informative articles in, for example, the *New Zealand Journal of Public Administration* – were Lipson's *Politics of Equality* (1948)³ and Polaschek's *Government Administration in New Zealand* (1958).⁴ The sesquicentennial of 1990 was marked by a welcome increase in departmental histories, notably but not exclusively, Alan Henderson's work on the SSC and its predecessor, the Public Service Commission,⁵ John E. Martin's history of the Department of Labour,⁶ and a number of contributions to the story of New Zealand's dealings with the rest of the world.⁷ The Historical Branch of Internal Affairs with the backing of Michael Bassett, as Minister from 1987-1990, was instrumental in promoting this activity. Its importance was underlined by the unprecedented restructuring of government agencies initiated in the mid-80s and the consequential threat to departmental records.

Institutional histories, given the inevitable constraints on the word-count, pose particular problems for historians. One concerns the balance among the decades. In the New Zealand case, should the archival material of the nineteenth century be ploughed to produce a record of colonial achievement, and sometimes failure – but at the expense of the excitement of the last decade? This tends to have been the pattern of recent departmental histories. *The Mother of All Departments* takes the other route: about a quarter of the text is devoted to the period since 1970. For the contemporary readership there is the attraction of reading about people and events of your acquaintance. The cost – and one about which I have some regrets in this case – is a thinner treatment of the earlier times when the role of Internal Affairs was of greater significance in the context of government as a whole.

The second dilemma for an historian of what, in the world of business, would be categorised as a 'conglomerate' is how to impose some order on the raw material. Bluntly, what to leave in or out. Bassett has chosen to concentrate on 'the core entity called Internal Affairs as it

moved forward, serving its political masters of the time' an approach which 'certainly fails to allow detailed treatment of any section of the department'.⁸ He was right to do so: this strategy gives the book its narrative flow. There is still scope for worthwhile histories in their own right, for example, of citizenship, or central government's relationship with local government; but this was not the place for them.

Reinforcing this organising principle is Bassett's own point of view. As a politician he has a particular interest in the exercise of power and the relative position of the players on the administrative battlefield. Hence chapter headings such as 'The Department Loses Ground in the 1950s' and 'Was the Department to Continue?'. A continuing theme, by no means played out, is the tension between those in the central agencies seeking to 'rationalise' the structure of government (in whose designs Internal Affairs did not fit neatly) and the department's senior management and often the Minister.

The heyday of Internal Affairs was the secretaryship of Sir Joseph Heenan (1935-49), an era in which the Department 'had been propelled back to the very front ranks of influence with Ministers'.⁹ Already celebrated by Oliver Duff as the quintessential public servant in his 1941 sketch,¹⁰ Heenan was one of a group of extraordinary public servants of the 1940s and 1950s: Ashwin in the Treasury, Beeby at Education, McIntosh in External Affairs, Campbell at the PSC, Entrican in the Forest Service. They were appointed at a young age, often in their 30s (thus giving the lie to the 'Buggins turn' picture of the 'old' public service, loyal to their ministers; but with clear views about the welfare of New Zealand and how they might help to shape it. In this constellation Heenan, and thus Internal Affairs, had a special place. While Parry was the Minister for 13 years, Heenan had almost daily access to Fraser as Prime Minister. The Department's reach extended out to local government while lubricating the machinery at the centre. Physical welfare and cultural affairs were within its bailiwick. (For a fascinating account of Heenan's role in Labour's cultural achievements see Rachel Barrowman's article in an earlier issue of this journal.)¹¹

During the 1960s and 1970s the Department lost such responsibilities as the Turnbull Library, and the Government Computer Centre. It gathered around it a collection of quangos – the Fire Service Commission, the Council for Recreation and Sport, and the Arts Council among them. It continued to administer nationality legislation, to organise visits by royalty and other distinguished visitors, to protect wildlife (despite innumerable reviews) and to service ministers. But, apart from the perennial but largely unproductive consideration of the future of local government, its responsibilities were rarely of high

political moment. After 1984 this changed. Particularly after the 1987 election, the Minister's determination to haul local government within the radical reform programme of the Lange administration — fairly recorded by Michael Bassett – dominated the Department's work. It lost wildlife to the new Department of Conservation and new Crown entities came within its ambit. The Department remains, however. It has been endlessly reviewed and restructured – the changes in National Archives are one recent example; and is currently experiencing a change process driven with zeal by Roger Blakeley, the fifth chief executive in a row appointed from outside the Department. Michael Bassett trails his coat: '[B]y its intellectual and artistic endeavours over the years, Internal Affairs has demonstrated that it possesses both a head and a heart as well. These will almost certainly keep it alive for many years to come.'¹² Neither these attributes, nor a sense of history, have seemed to weigh heavily with the deconstructionists of public sector reform. We shall see.

With a caveat about the respective weightings given to the decades – there won't quickly be another state-funded chance to look at the nineteenth century – *The Mother of All Departments* is a worthy addition to our knowledge of New Zealand public administration. Bassett laments the destruction of departmental personal files 'hampering my struggle to put a human face on the work of the department'.¹³ His use of interviews and numerous photographs go some way to remedying this. The book is well-indexed and, as so often, the Notes are a rich source in themselves.

NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Bassett, 1997, p.7.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Leslie Lipson, *The Politics of Equality*, University of Chicago Press, 1948.
- 4 R.J. Polaschek, *Government Administration in New Zealand*, New Zealand Institute of Public Administration, 1958.
- 5 Alan Henderson, *The Quest for Efficiency: The Origins of the State Services Commission*, Historical Branch, Department of Internal Affairs/SSC, 1990.
- 6 John E. Martin, *Holding the Balance: A History of New Zealand's Department of Labour 1891-1995*, Canterbury University Press, 1996.
- 7 For example, Malcolm Templeton (Ed.) *An Eye, an Ear and a Voice: 50 Years in New Zealand's External Relations 1943-1993*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1993.
- 8 Bassett, 1997, p.12.
- 9 Ibid, p. 143.
- 10 Oliver Duff, *New Zealand Now*, Paul's Book Arcade Ltd, 1941, pp. 93-95.
- 11 Rachel Barrowman, 'Culture-organising: Joe Heenan & the beginnings of state patronage of the arts' in *New Zealand Studies*, Vol. 6. No. 2, July 1996.
- 12 Bassett, 1997, p. 272.
- 13 Ibid, p.12.