

*Along for the Ride: A Political Memoir*

By Tony Simpson

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Reviewed by Jim McAloon.

Tony Simpson has led a life committed to social justice pursued through both political engagement and an extensive writing career. This memoir delivers exactly what the subtitle promises: a retrospect on Simpson's political life. His private life remains, mostly, just that.

He is some seventeen years older than me but there are one or two bits of common ground between us. We were both precociously early readers, and discovered that this was scarcely appreciated in the regimentation to which one was introduced at primary school. Schooling (we attended the same establishment for young gentlemen) produced in both of us 'a lifelong antipathy to competitive team games', and respect for libraries as a refuge. However, I left Christchurch more reluctantly than he did.

Simpson's lifelong dislike of arbitrary authority was thus developed early. He was, as he says, fortunate in being born when bright working-class youth could realistically attend university, of which he made the most (one positive dimension of his later-diagnosed Asperger's syndrome was the ability to focus intently on a field of study). For reasons which are clearly explained, Simpson followed political science rather than history at university, and thus found his vocation. It would spoil the reader's pleasure if this review divulged some of the best stories emerging from Simpson's years as a student politician and activist; suffice to say there is much perception as well as entertainment in the chapter.

State Advances was where Simpson began his public service career but it flourished in Broadcasting. This meant a move to Wellington, which became his home for most of the last fifty years. Broadcasting in the early 1970s was a nursery for talent, and Simpson's own mentor was the legendary Jim Henderson (whose 'utter contempt for authority' was, if anything, even greater than Simpson's). Broadcasting, too, drew out Simpson's latent interest in history (and got him into some scrapes with specimens of what E P Thompson called *Academicus superciliosus*). Naturally enough, Simpson fell in with the political and cultural avant-garde, including *Cock*, and again it would ruin the fun to repeat the best stories, both about that magazine and why Toss Wollaston accepted a knighthood. Already, though, while having as much fun as possible, Simpson knew that political change is a difficult and complicated long-term project (his reservations about James K. Baxter are well made).

Simpson's broadcasting bosses actively, if unwittingly, encouraged him to move to the PSA as an organiser. There is interesting material on the McLeod-*Listener* affair in 1972, among other union struggles, on the Sutch trial, and enough material to deter any posthumous nostalgia for Muldoon. However, in attributing a union movement Roman Catholic network responsibility for some marginalisation, surely Simpson confuses his Popes (Pius XI and XII may well be accused of fellow-travelling with fascists, but not Paul VI, who was in office at the time of which Simpson writes, 145). Following a brief period at the Arts Council, Simpson took himself off to London for some years, again to work as a union organiser. There are some useful insights about the causes of industrial strife in the later 1970s, as well as the revelation of good beer and quality newspapers (New Zealand has now caught up with Britain on the former, if not the latter).

With impeccable timing Simpson returned to New Zealand shortly before Thatcher won office, and returned to the PSA and Muldoon's later years. Much of this narrative covers familiar enough ground, again with entertaining and informative perspective – not least on David Lange and his ministers. State sector reform was, of course, a particular concern and its unhappy consequences are laid out, as well as that of public broadcasting (and readers should

look at the little zinger of a footnote on 218). Employment in Customs from 1988 led to the PSA presidency, and some interesting recollections on unions and political ‘entryism’, not to mention the proper function of unions as workers’ organisations.

From the PSA, Simpson went to work in Jim Anderton’s parliamentary office in 1996. This relationship would last for many years, and provides the most valuable and absorbing part of the book. To a significant degree, Simpson shares Anderton’s perspectives, both being pragmatic reformers with a deep understanding of the political process (a quality which, Simpson suggests, was not universal within the Alliance). Simpson recounts some successes in defence policy debates, and the development of a progressive taxation policy before 1999. In particular, the struggle to establish Kiwibank is well discussed. As is well known, the successful, first, Clark administration supported US military action in Afghanistan after the September 2001 attacks; a group within the Alliance broke the party over that. Simpson recounts this in some detail, still evidently sad and angry at the result (I can only agree with his comments about the later strange attraction of a German millionaire for some of those involved). Anderton, however, remained a minister until 2008 and in parliament until 2011, and Simpson remained with him.

The final section of the book is Simpson’s literary memoir. Many of his books have been influential, and for this reviewer *The Sugarbag Years* and *Te Riri Pakeha* remain the most significant, and *A Vision Betrayed* curiously under-rated. He discusses the writing of some – by no means all – of his books and his experience in literary organisation and advocacy. Penultimately – just to confirm that Simpson is a polymath – he provides an extended discussion of cuisine and culture. And finally, a personal reflection on being a gay man in New Zealand and of his generation. I noted very few errors. Norman Kirk did not oversee the exit of the South African consulate (58; Lange did). The un-named ‘highly respectable and elderly lady’ who famously paraded with a placard down the aisle of the Springboks’ plane in 1981 was Mary Baker, who while greatly respected was certainly not ‘elderly’ and was very prominent in the Christchurch anti-apartheid movement (197). Liz Tennant did not succeed Fran Wilde in Wellington Central, but was MP for Island Bay from 1987 (249). None of them detract from an absorbing memoir.