

The biographies of Ward and Coates

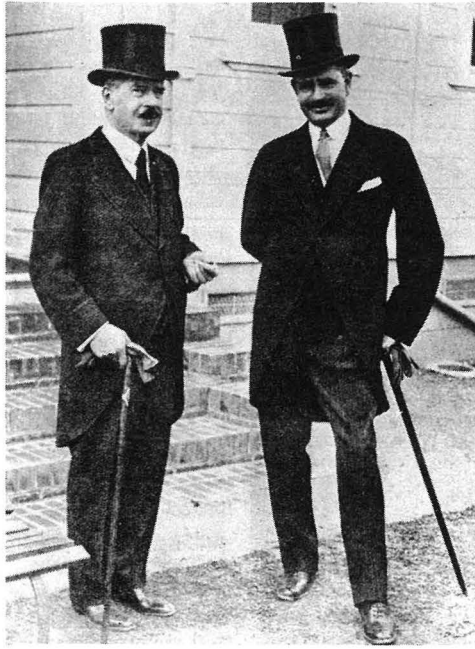
'Like making a very good pair of shoes'

MICHAEL BASSETT

The Hon Dr Michael Bassett has returned to the writing of history after a distinguished excursion into politics. He published his biography of Joseph Ward last year, is now well advanced on a biography of Gordon Coates and is also writing a history of the Department of Internal Affairs.

As you might have guessed, I find writing political biography fun. Any politician who has spent time climbing Disraeli's 'greasy pole' enjoys reading and talking about others' success or failure at the game. No social gathering of MPs was ever complete in my day without tales of one's forebears. Usually it was the more outrageous that produced hilarity; bare-faced lies, hypocrisy, meanness, larrikinism. Parliament imposed something of a straitjacket on those in its institutional care; politicians who escaped it while still retaining their seats, always seem slightly larger than life. Political longevity is a quality spoken of in awe; lengthy tenure of ministerial office inspires reverence from modern politicians who can count themselves lucky to get beyond six or nine years in office. With twenty-three and a half years as Minister, Sir Joseph Ward holds the all-time New Zealand record, and Coates's sixteen years would put him ahead of any politician in the last twenty years. Needless to say, legends develop when one is in office for so long. Ward had the reputation of being a well-dressed, rapid, vapour orator – which he certainly was in later years; he was the man who spoke so fast the Hansard and press reporters couldn't keep up. The Coates stories around Parliament are of his handsome, easy-going disposition, his chain smoking and his way with women.

To write about these two men is to recount the lives of two of the four ministerial workhorses who dominated New Zealand political life for almost half a century. Scarcely anyone else mattered during the years 1890-1935. Seddon,



Above: Joseph Ward and Gordon Coates on 10 December 1908, the day Ward assumed the Prime Ministership from Coates.

Ward, Massey and Coates: each had the physical constitution of an ox, and abilities way beyond the average. Each seemed unable to contemplate retirement, and all four died while holding office as Ministers of the Crown. Two were Prime Ministers at the time of their deaths, three if one counts Ward who had resigned barely six weeks before. Seddon, with Massey only a few months behind him, holds the record at thirteen years for tenure of the top spot; both Ward and Coates exceed the other two in the number of years they held ministerial office. All four came from an era that expected less of its politicians than today's voters; their delivery rates therefore fell less behind expectations.

They held their seats longer, although the prime-ministerial terms of both Ward and Coates were disasters. Coates, in particular, became embroiled with that great destroyer of modern governments, economic depression. Only Ward suffered the indignity of losing his parliamentary seat on one occasion – in 1919, although Coates came close to it in 1935. Both Ward and Coates came at the end of their political eras, seeing out the parties that they had been so closely identified with during their political lives.

Recounting the life of politicians and checking the veracity of the stories that surround all of them, depends on the supply of material. 'Modern biographers', one commentator recently observed, 'are both drowned by their material and stranded without it.' Nash left fourteen tons of papers, Ward scarcely anything. Coates half a collection. Just as Nash hoarded, Ward destroyed, seeking a court order in 1906 for permission to erase (he hoped) the story of his bankruptcy. Coates discovered a partial destruction of his papers in 1936 and was very annoyed. The papers of Seddon and Massey are, to say the least, spotty. There is a considerable amount of personal material about Seddon in his son's papers. Biographies of Seddon and Massey are quite feasible. While my old mentor, Willis Airey, always maintained that there needed to be a substantial collection



of papers before political biography could be contemplated, the truth, as I think I was able to prove with Ward, is that this is not the sine qua non. It is impossible to be in Parliament, let alone Cabinet, without leaving hundreds, if not thousands of clues about oneself for anyone eager enough to become a biographical sleuth. Correspondence with contemporaries, departmental files, and Cabinet records will provide material, and fortunately during those earlier years when our leading politicians took such little care of their historical reputations, the press found politics more absorbing, and provided much more written detail than one would find today. Wills and legal documents relating to land holdings both gave me a surprising amount of information about Ward. All that can safely be said is that an absence of personal papers lengthens the search, but the excitement of each factual discovery can be all the greater as a result.

In his biography of Arnold Toynbee, William McNeill talks about the hypotheses he needed to develop to make sense of his subject's life. If one is prepared to take what McNeill calls 'great leaps of the imagination' – and I firmly believe such are necessary to make sense of any life, particularly a political one – then a credible story can always be told. It helps, of course, if the writer possesses experience or practical knowledge of the political process. Throughout my writing I have enjoyed speculating about the explanation why certain conclusions were reached. For instance,

Ward's decision to buy the dreadnought was a puzzle until I thought carefully about the nature of the political predicament the Prime Minister found himself in at the beginning of 1909. My own experience of a Cabinet surrounded with difficulties, and sometimes ready to seek a diversion, gave me the clue. Use of imagination is fundamental to political biography.

A few years ago when addressing the question of New Zealand political biography Keith Sinclair talked of the 'six veils', or layers, that a biographer needs to remove to reveal the subject.² First is the face the public sees. With long careers these public faces can alter over time. Ward, when a bright young Cabinet minister in Ballance's Government, attracted notice because of his 'adorable moustache' which he worshipped 'with the rapt attention of a Hindoo contemplating the problem of Nirvana'. There was a racy, risk-taking quality to his administration of public affairs, just as there was to his private investments. In those days Ward lived life in the fast lane. By the time he was my age he seemed old, self important and garrulous. However, Ward never lost his commercial intuition and died a rich man, having been bankrupt barely thirty-three years earlier.

Coates, on the other hand, was little more than a pretty face when he entered Parliament in 1911. He had no talent as a speaker and could easily be led astray by an interjection. His speaking abilities improved slowly over time, but were not noticed until he faced the rough and tough of the 1928 election campaign. Standing six feet tall, with a forty-four inch chest, broad shoulders and not an ounce of fat throughout his life, it was Coates's physique that commanded attention. He was a man's man – and something of a lady's man too. More than any other New Zealand politician I've read about, people responded to Coates the person; he was a topic of frequent comment. Indeed, a whole successful election campaign, that of 1925, was built around his person – his good looks, his ability on horseback, his fearlessness that won him a Military Cross and Bar, his appeal to a generation mourning servicemen who had not been so lucky. The depression, however, changed perceptions of Coates, convincing many that no matter how pretty the face, he had no heart. World War II refurbished Coates's image; somewhat grudgingly it was conceded that at least he was a patriot who, more than his party leader, Sid Holland, knew when to lay politics to one side.

Sinclair's second layer to be stripped away is a person's stock of ideas, or philosophy of life. All four of New Zealand's workhorses between 1890 and the late 1930s were intelligent, largely self-taught men. British, Canadian, Australian and South African cabinets at the time had men like Asquith, Mackenzie King, Deakin, and Smuts, each possessing formidable academic qualifications. The description 'intellectual' could reasonably be used of each of them. No one could ever accuse Seddon, Ward, Massey or Coates of being an intellectual. Each had read little. All of them were educated on the job. Mind you, as a school, Parliament

Opposite: Postcard photograph of the Right Honourable Sir Joseph G. Ward PC, KCMG, taken by Elliot & Fry in 1906.

Right: Lady Ward's 'at home' to Lady Ranfurly at Awarua House, Wellington, 1904. Lady Ranfurly and his Excellency the Governor are in the centre, flanked by the split couples of the Wards and the Seddons.



should never be despised. Huge quantities of material pass under the noses of members, and competent, if untrained minds have plenty of opportunities to absorb ideas and work through issues with others' help. Each of the quartet, Seddon, Ward, Massey and Coates, had a retentive memory. In his younger days, Ward had frequent inspirations, while Coates showed a capacity to master detail during the Depression that astounded his university-trained 'brains trust' of PhDs and a professor. Only Seddon, however, could be said ever to have developed much of a reputation on the world stage, and that reputation earned from his 1902 visit to South Africa and the Imperial Conference that year came more from brawn and bombast than from brain. One of his nicknames was 'old leather lungs'. On the world stage Ward's mind seemed quite undisciplined when he tried to explain his 'Imperial Parliament' to the London conference in 1911. His contributions to the War Cabinet 1917-19 were slight. Lloyd George devised a method at the 1918 conference of giving him the slip. Massey lacked conviction at any of the conferences he attended, and Coates contributed little to the 1926 Imperial Conference, although everyone liked him. It was only when the subject in question, meat, was raised at Ottawa in 1932 and the Ministerial Conference of 1935 that Coates revealed a knowledge of the subject that gave him an advantage over his more ethereal British contemporaries.

Both Ward and Coates possessed personal philosophies. Each had received a firm religious education, the one Catholic, the other Anglican. Each knew the difference between right and wrong. Ward learned the value of money and hard work from his mother, who passed on to him a shrewd business judgement as well as a sense of compassion. Ward believed that the investment of public and private resources should always show a return on capital. Coates learned his skills in a more rural environment where there were always risks with cattle-rearing. Ward was twenty-two years older than Coates, but the issues in isolated, unsettled Northland in the early years of the century were those of Southland twenty years earlier. The need for roads, bridges, telephones and post offices drew the Coates family towards the Liber-

als, and it was no accident that Coates entered Parliament in 1911 pledged to support Ward who, in a strange twist of fate, was to defeat him seventeen years later. However, belief in the leasehold was an earlier South Island fad; it had no appeal to the Coates family. Not until 1900, thirty-three years after settling his land on the Hukatere Peninsula jutting down into the Kaipara, did Coates's father finally extract title to his land from his Irish brother-in-law. Only then was the farm able to borrow to develop the 2,250 acres. Coates understood the necessity of title from an early age. He was a lifelong freeholder.

Both Ward and Coates believed in an active state on behalf of private enterprise; neither saw the State as a substitute for individual effort. Ward's mistake over the £70 million loan in 1928, a mistake that defeated Coates, appears to suggest a different approach to State spending. Yet Ward had simply misread his notes; it was a mistake with shattering repercussions, but nonetheless, a mistake, an aberration.

Keith Sinclair's third area of study is the subject's private life, her or his relations with friends and family. Ward had friends and supporters throughout Southland, yet his religion seemed to make more difficult close personal relationships of the kind that Coates revelled in, and benefited from throughout his political life. Theresa Ward appears to have been the only woman in Ward's life. Women liked him, he dressed well, and oozed Irish charm that many found attractive, but there is not a skerrick of evidence to suggest that he strayed from the marriage bed. Coates, on the other hand was worldly wise long before he married, and there is evidence that while he loved his wife Marjorie, and that she was the only woman for whom he put himself out, there were others in his life.

With character formation (the fourth of Sinclair's categories), our subjects share similarities. Ward's father died when he was four; Coates's father began showing unmistakable signs of manic depression when Gordon was eleven. In both cases, mothers were all important; simple, straightforward messages were imparted to their boys by the deeply pious Hannah Ward and Eleanor Coates. The latter was

better educated, and could read, write and spell accurately, all of which were a challenge to Ward's mother throughout her life. Both mothers, however, were moved by simple faiths; standard Catholic prayers for Hannah, *Pilgrims Progress* and the Bible for Eleanor. Strict discipline ruled in both households. One of Coates's daughters told me that whenever she visited her grandmother she spent hours with her head in a pillow, saying her prayers.

The fifth of Sinclair's six veils could be called the subject's self-image. Neither Ward nor Coates left prayers or sermons like Alfred Deakin, nor the occasional articles or musings of Asquith, the autobiographical notes of Lester Pearson or Billy Hughes, or the treatises on a variety of subjects left behind by Bert Evatt. The biographer has to glean what evidence there is about how Ward and Coates saw themselves from occasional reported throwaway remarks when they were in a relaxed mood. Ward could sometimes make passionate declarations about himself when under attack. In 1910 after two bitter pamphlets had been written about him, and again in February 1912 when he feared his Government was facing defeat in the House, Ward vigorously laid about him, telling the House:

What do I care for the attacks and suggestions that have been made against me when I know they are not true. I am at least conscious of the fact that I have been responsible for saving this country from a crisis three times in my history as a Minister of the Crown. What do I care about their taunts that I am anxious to cling to office, when I am not, and when on personal grounds I would be glad to be relieved of it and the responsibility attaching to it.³

There was no false modesty about Ward, and since he kept standing for Parliament and yearning for the highest office for another eighteen years until his death, one must pre-

sume that he had a fair capacity for self-delusion as well.

Coates was more at ease with himself. He enjoyed the admiration, even adulation that was showered upon him in earlier days. A year before he died a reporter described him as 'straight as a gun barrel', a well-dressed man, white handkerchief in his pocket, hair swept back, walking jauntily down the Terrace each morning from the Wellington Club⁴ with friends at either side. Like Ward he liked to picture himself as holding office partly against his own better judgement. A few weeks before the election of 1935 Coates told an audience: 'I myself am one of the most disinterested persons in the country as far as personal feeling about [the election] is concerned. My attitude is that if the public should choose someone else – well, I will be able to get up from my desk, which leaves one without a moment to oneself and one's family. There are also hobbies that one may have, but which have had to be neglected entirely. Being just a plain old 'cockatoo' one wants to get back into the wilds, to get on a saddle, and to be back among the people one was brought up with'.⁵ Again there was an element of self-delusion. Those same people whom Coates yearned to return to nearly rejected him a few weeks later, yet Coates went on and on as their MP, and was planning to stand once more when he suffered his fatal heart attack in May 1943 a few months before the election.

The last of Sinclair's veils is an analysis of the 'inner man' – a subject that he rightly describes as difficult, and which, in my view, partly overlaps his analysis of self-image. There is at least one other area – a seventh veil – for speculation and useful comparison in a political biography, especially involving a Cabinet minister, that Sinclair overlooks. It has to do with the managerial style of one's subject





when in office, and consequently his or her effectiveness as a leader in Government. In the last analysis political victory has less to do with a leader's ideas as such, and more to do with public perceptions of the precise direction a leader and party are likely to travel over the next triennium. Throughout the twentieth century, voters everywhere have responded to clear direction on a handful of trigger issues – economic progress, financial responsibility, consistency of purpose. Voters like their leaders to respond predictably when certain buttons are pushed. Australian voters always knew where Menzies' foreign policy was heading, and one could count on Hawke to sob before the TV lights when certain emotional issues surfaced. Whatever else could be said of Holyoake, he remained consistently inactive on a growing number of matters which historians can now show required attention. The point is that voters like to be sure about their leaders; surprise seldom has attractions.

Both Ward and Coates possessed less certain bearings than their predecessors. Both succeeded to office at a time when the political pendulum was swinging away from their parties. Both found the going tough and were compared unfavourably with their predecessors. Each succeeded in winning his first election as Prime Minister, and was then overwhelmed by the disintegrative pressures already in operation. Ward inherited a large, disputatious caucus from

Opposite: The Ministerial House, 260 Tinakori Road, c1900. Both Ward and Coates lived in this house, Ward from 1900–1912, and Coates from 1925–1928. Today it is Premier House. Alexander Turnbull Library.

Above: Prime Minister Coates in London, October 1826, speaking to Mrs Elliot-Lyn, the first Englishwoman to own and fly her own aeroplane. Evening Post.

Seddon, one that contained factions on every issue from land tenure to labour reform. Ward vacillated back and forth, then sought to impose his own foreign preoccupations upon the political landscape, only to find the public completely uninterested in his Imperial posturing. In the 1925 election Coates brought his own unruly caucus to Parliament. It was the down-side to an extraordinary election victory. John A Lee called them 'elderly men of Victorian sentiment ... washed out of their armchairs into the House, where they ... busied themselves in trying to turn the clock back'. The Prime Minister found himself the fourth youngest of the 53 members in his Reform caucus. He had businessmen, original settlers, farmers and lawyers all pulling this way and that, and he, himself, was uncertain what the economic signals portended. Confusing signals have seldom appealed politically, as the electors showed both Prime Ministers when they returned to the hustings. Ultimately the voters' respect for any politician usually relates to his or her ability to win; the biographer must keep this in mind, and be prepared to speculate about the factors influencing success and failure.

Political biography has its detractors, some of them among its best practitioners. Keith Sinclair doubted political biography was a literary genre at all. 'The biography of a politician', he wrote, 'is not principally political history, but the story of a person'.⁶ Yes and no. Getting behind the person is vital. But one cannot ignore the context in which he or she operated. Some politicians ride waves, others make them, or try to. Prime Ministers are usually in the latter category, and for them it is essential for the biographer to write political history and to engage the subject in the process of change. Roy Jenkins acknowledges this complex interweaving in the introduction to his book of essays called *Gallery of Twentieth Century Portraits*. Political biography, he says, 'is better designated as a craft than as an art'. The craft of biography, he says, 'is like making a very good pair of shoes, whereas the art of creating poetry or a novel or even a great work of history can be infused with a touch of genius which transcends gradations of quality'.⁷ I agree. I've always liked good shoes, and have never felt, after years of labour on Ward and Coates, that I was big enough to fill theirs.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Andrew Sinclair quoted by Roy Jenkins, *Gallery of Twentieth Century Portraits*, London, 1988, p 11.
- ² William H McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee: A Life*, New York, 1989, introduction.
- ³ Jock Phillips (ed), *Biography in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1985, p 30.
- ⁴ Michael Bassett, *Sir Joseph Ward*, Auckland, 1993, p 38.
- ⁵ *Ward*, p 207.
- ⁶ Denis Wilmot, 'The Man From Matakoho', Manuscript, 1942, Montague Papers, 77/249/1, Alexander Turnbull Library.
- ⁷ *Dominion*, 3 October 1935.
- ⁸ *Lyttelton Times*, 27 October 1928.
- ⁹ *Biography*, p 30.
- ¹⁰ Jenkins, *Gallery*, p 10.