

Reviews & previews

BOOK REVIEW

An effortless combination of utility and elegance

Landmarks in New Zealand Publishing: Blackwood & Janet Paul 1945-1968

Janet Paul and John Mansfield Thomson.
Wellington, National Library of New Zealand,
1995, 24pp.

Reviewed by Paul Millar

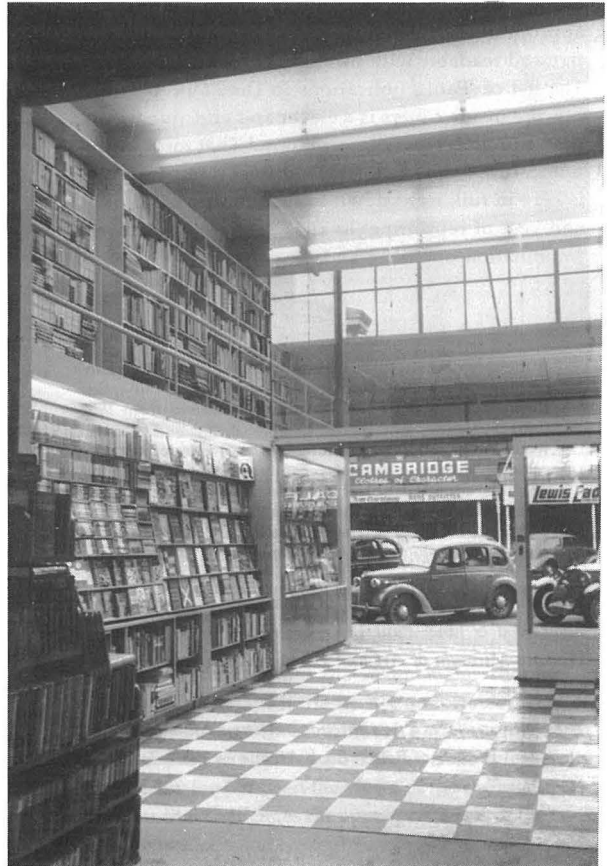
This little book is a valuable short history of one of our most important early publishing concerns. Titles like Frank Sargeson's *A Man and his Wife* (1947), Ruth France's *The Race* (1958), Amelia Batistich's *An Olive Tree in Dalmatia*, Bill Pearson's *Coal Flat* (1963), and Hone Tuwhare's outstanding first book of poetry *No Ordinary Sun* (1964) are just a few of the peaks in Blackwood and Janet Paul's impressive list that spans 23 years and around 200 titles.

But in assessing the Pauls' contribution to New Zealand publishing the range is as important as the peaks in demonstrating their consistent commitment to books written in, and about, New Zealand. Of particular importance are the ground-breaking publications on Māori culture that were, in Janet Paul's words, 'an attempt to make people understand more about the Māori heritage, not just for the Pākēha, but for the Māori themselves'.

Landmarks' first section 'Origins' is based on a seminar that was given at Victoria University's Stout Research Centre in 1991. It takes the form of a dialogue between Janet Paul and John Thomson. Paul's pithy anecdotal account, which reads like a 'who's who' of New Zealand literature, provides a historical record that future researchers in New Zealand publishing history will do well to consult. Thomson's contribution—he is described in a magnificent piece of understatement as the prompter—is to direct the dialogue while simultaneously locating the publishing venture within the wider context of New Zealand history, society and culture. He does this with an ease that comes from his own intimate knowledge of publishing.

Right: Another view of Ernst Plischke's redesigned shop, 1948. Plischke Archives, Vienna.

That a small general bookshop in Hamilton went on to achieve international status as a bookseller, and recognition as one of New Zealand's leading publishers, is a good story in itself. Thomson's 'prompts' recount the tale of the founding father and his forward-looking son with lively economy, and the cover illustrations, depicting two generations of the bookshop, provide a usefully emblematic accompaniment. The back-cover view of a busy Edwardian Street symbolises the concerns of William Henry Paul, Blackwood's father. The sign 'Paul's Book Arcade' may dominate the foreground of the photograph but there is no view into the interior of the business. Instead the eye is drawn—by a foot-path and shop-awnings converging on a central vanishing point—to a busy crowd that represents the people of Hamilton to whom Paul (Snr) donated so much of his time. In contrast the geometrical precision of the front-cover photograph, 'Ernst Plischke's redesigned shop, 1948', gives a clear indication of the priorities of the business under the direction of the son. It is shelves of books narrowing into the distance that draw the eye, while stark geometric



shapes suggest the exceptional precision and professionalism that led the president of the British Publisher's Association to rank Paul's among the best 14 bookshops in the world.

Landmarks includes an essay by Jeanette Ward and Barbara Rogers recalling the many years they spent working in Blackwood Paul's Hamilton shop. Paul was no easy employer and the account of their labours under his benign tyranny induces the odd shudder. 'Careless errors were rewarded with scorn sufficient to unnerve the calmest of us'. Yet their recollections have a strong undercurrent of affection and admiration. He gave his staff in-house bookselling courses—'give in one short phrase the kinds of subjects treated by the following writers of novels: Koestler, Orwell, Rex Warner, [and] Graham Greene'—and sought to instill in them his own love of literature. Ward and Rogers felt that in working for Blackwood Paul they were 'part of, and sometimes at the centre of, the world of books'.

Thomson and Paul have achieved a delicate and skilful balance with *Landmarks*: producing both a useful research tool and a book that should appeal to the general reader. The tone in these 24 pages is appropriate to its subject and intention: it is informative and readable with carefully chosen illustrations. The list of 'Paul Publications in Date Order' which fills the inside covers is a clever and effective way of presenting necessary information.¹ That most essential feature of any scholarly work—a bibliography—is here in full, right down to the number of editions and year of reprinting. In all, a seemingly effortless combination of utility and elegance, sets this book apart.

NOTE

¹ A number of these titles are educational publications; concerning these Janet Paul comments that they were "imaginatively commissioned and scrupulously edited from 1958 until 1965 by Phoebe Meikle". Given that members of Blackwood Paul's family were stung by the "welter of negative criticism" of him in Meikle's recently published autobiography this, admittedly brief, mention shows a commendable generosity of spirit. In *Landmarks*, Ward and Rogers, by offering a contrasting view of Blackwood Paul as an employer, speak eloquently in his defence.

The exhibition 'Landmarks in New Zealand publishing: Blackwood & Janet Paul 1945-1965' will be on display at Waikato Museum of Art and History during April to August 1996.

The Historic Places Trust intends putting a commemorative plaque on the site of Paul's Book Arcade in Victoria Street, Hamilton.

BOOK REVIEW

A comfortable level of understanding?

Far from the Promised Land? Being Jewish in New Zealand

Ann Beaglehole and Hal Levine. Pacific Press, Wellington, 1995, 146pp.

Reviewed by Paul Morris

Jews have come to New Zealand since the beginnings of colonial settlement and they are still coming, although these days they are more likely to come from South Africa and the countries of the former Soviet Union than from Britain, Australia and the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires. Their number has always been, and continues to be, small. The 1991 census recorded only just over 3,000 Jews in New Zealand, approximately 0.1% of the population.

In this new study, the two Wellington-based authors seek to provide an 'up-to-date and comprehensive picture of Jewish identity by capturing something of what they call 'a Kiwi style of Jewishness'. They attempt to convey what it is like to grow up Jewish in New Zealand and the sorts of religious lives lived by Jews here; to portray the experiences of antisemitism and levels and types of identification with Israel and Jews living overseas; to question the significance of the Holocaust for New Zealand Jews; to discuss the attitudes of Jews to marriage to non-Jews; to discern the extent of Jews' commitment to transmitting their Jewish identity to new generations, and to consider what part being Jewish plays in the lives of this tiny band of New Zealanders.

In addressing these issues this book offers fascinating insights into the nature of New Zealand's multicultural society from the perspective of the experiences of one of its minority groups. Also, unlike earlier studies, these views are enhanced by the inclusion of material on Jews who have voted with their feet and left New Zealand to live in Australia, Israel or the US.

Since 1958 when the last book-length study of New Zealand Jewry, as a whole, was published, New Zealand society has undergone dramatic changes, not least in how we understand ourselves and our history. There is an evident need for a new study to reflect these changes. Also, in spite of the fact that only just over half of those self-identified Jews in the 1991 census are affiliated to a synagogue, until most recently studies have tended to focus on the norms of established synagogue communities and all but ignored those who have fallen 'beyond the Pale'. Beaglehole and Levine attempt to redress this imbalance by casting their net