

Reviews & previews

∞ EXHIBITION

*Landmarks in New Zealand publishing:
Blackwood & Janet Paul 1945-68*
Turnbull Room, National Library Gallery
17 November 1995 – 28 February 1996

A weekly Stout Centre seminar given by Janet Paul and J.M. Thomson in 1991 has led to a forthcoming exhibition *Landmarks in New Zealand Publishing: Blackwood & Janet Paul 1945-68*, to open in the Turnbull Room of the National Library on 17 November. Janet Paul had given an earlier seminar on Dr J.C. Beaglehole, who had initially been her mentor in typography. Beaglehole not only designed much of the visual material associated with Victoria University College, but numerous books and pamphlets. He also encouraged the printers at Whitcombe and Tombs to develop a sense of typographical style. Wellington benefited from his presence in many ways, from the programmes of the Chamber Music Society to much ephemera. Jim Collinge, the Director at the time, subsequently invited Janet Paul to take the subject further and trace the fortunes of the publishing house originally known as Paul's Book Arcade, later Blackwood & Janet Paul, through a commentary on a selection of the 200 or so books they published. This session, recorded for the Stout Centre archives, forms the basis of the principal essay in the exhibition catalogue.

The publishing venture grew out of a bookshop opened in Hamilton in 1901 by William Henry Paul (1879 – 1962), who had come to New Zealand from his native Monmouthshire as front-of-house man for a J.C. Williamson theatrical company. When in 1933 his son Blackwood, a graduate in arts and law from Auckland University College, criticised some of his father's ways of doing things, he was challenged to do better himself: 'If you can see so clearly what ought to be done you'd better come and do it!'. Paul senior had a reputation as an outstanding organiser and preferred to be involved with projects such as the beautification of the city, running the Waikato Winter Show or directing the Children's Health Camp at Port Waikato.

Blackwood Paul (1908–1965) believed that running a good bookshop was a vocation and a service to the community: under his direction Paul's Book Arcade became renowned, not only in the city but throughout New Zealand and overseas. Keenly interested in social experiments, he travelled in the United Kingdom and Russia in 1936, met Victor



Gollancz, who introduced him to the Left Book Club, and in due course became their New Zealand representative. He wrote an unpublished book on these experiences.

During the war he served in the Army Education Welfare Service (AEWS). In 1945, when the idealistic Progressive Publishing Society of Wellington ran into severe financial difficulties, he decided to enter publishing and took over some of their titles. Blackwood had met Janet Paul (née Wilkinson) on the committee of the PPS and that same year they married. She became production manager, designer, typographer and editor (with Blackwood), all in one. The first book to appear under the imprint of Paul's Book Arcade, taken over from PPS, was Gordon Mirams' *Speaking Candidly: films and people in New Zealand*, which quickly sold out.

Janet Paul had trained at Wellington Teachers' Training College in 1939-40 and after a stint as sole-charge teacher at Mackford School, Mokau River, returned to Wellington to work as Locomotive Plan Tracer in the Railways Department while attending lectures in History at Victoria University College.

Plischke's newly-designed bookshop in Auckland for Blackwood and Janet Paul.

From 1942-5 she was employed in the Historical Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs where she worked with Dr J.C. Beaglehole. She had graduated BA (Hons) in 1943. After the acquisition of Blackwood & Janet Paul by the English firm of Longman in 1968 she became Art Librarian at the Alexander Turnbull Library from 1971 until 1980. As a painter she has exhibited since 1957 and after retirement more regularly. Victoria University of Wellington bestowed a DLitt (*honoris causa*) on her in 1992.

The fledgling publishing house was fortunate in being able to attract to their list a highly successful best-selling novelist, Mary Scott, who wrote at least one novel each year, the sales of which financed uneconomic ventures in other fields. Mary Scott was no ordinary romantic best-seller: her special qualities have received a detailed critical appreciation by Terry Sturm in the recent *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*. Helen Wilson's autobiography, *My First Eighty Years*, written at Janet Paul's suggestion, when its author was going blind, was reprinted many times. The novelists Dan Davin, M.K. Joseph and W.H. Pearson, and the short story writer Frank Sargeson, all published important works. Hone Tuwhare, the outstanding Maori poet, received widespread acclaim for his first volume, *No Ordinary Sun*. Several of the writers of children's books won the coveted Esther Glen Award. Larry Baigent's *The Unseen City: one hundred and twenty three photos of Auckland*, published after Blackwood's death in 1965, and pilloried by fellow photographers at the time, is now a collectors' item, being recognised as a pioneer in its field.

This exhibition will survey for the first time the achievements of a unique publishing team and record their contribution to New Zealand culture during a period of some twenty-five years.

'Landmarks in New Zealand Publishing: Blackwood & Janet Paul 1945 - 1968' opens in the Turnbull Room of the National Library Gallery on Friday 17 November and runs until the end of February 1996.

BOOK REVIEW

Building the New World: Work, Politics and Society in Caversham, 1880s-1920s by Erik Olssen
Auckland University Press, 1995.

It is hard to write a review while feeling sea-green with envy. What would one give to have the chance – or the wit to recognise the chance – to write a book which remakes a subject? Ten years from now, I modestly predict, that will be how people will re-

gard Erik Olssen's masterly study. The historical investigation of community in pakeha New Zealand is changed, utterly.

There were precursors, of course. In *The Farthest Promised Land* (1981) and other writings Rollo Arnold proposed a community-centred analysis of the late nineteenth-century Dominion. Miles Fairburn responded slashingly in *The Ideal Society and its Enemies* (1989), asserting that demoralisation and atomisation, not cohesive community, marked Victorian New Zealand. Arnold responded in *New Zealand's Burning* (1994), but his central source – local newspaper files – could provide insufficient material to drive home his case. New Zealand always looked an unpropitious place in which to find straw for that kind of brick; chiefly because census enumerators' schedules, so central to cognate work overseas, routinely have been destroyed here.

The measure of Erik Olssen's achievement is that, together with other team members in the Caversham Project, he has triumphed over this huge handicap. By linking evidence from street directories with electoral rolls and other public records, and then blending in material taken from a host of voluntary organisations he has produced a vivid, nuanced study of artisan Dunedin in the making. We watch British immigrants arriving, lugging ships' chests filled with intellectual baggage: Chartism, nonconformity, radicalism, (contested) temperance, craft culture. We watch as this baggage is spread on a new landscape, subtly modifying meanings. Some things do not change. Against pressures to recast understandings about work, shop culture remains remarkably vital as skilled craft workers resist attempts to wrest away their control of the labour process. Some things do change: by 1920 the New Zealand working class is well in the making politically, with a raft of new organisations seeking to represent class interests. Yet here, too, Olssen urges, we must look for evidence of continuity alongside rupture.

For the historian of the Red Feds, this is new country. The novelty partly comes from a shift in focus, from unskilled workers to skilled. Partly it comes from a shift in magnification, from nation to suburb. The two points are connected: the devil is in the detail. It is only through obsessive probing of how work intersected with leisure and family life at the community level that Olssen can make sense of what skill meant in Caversham between 1880 and 1920: crafts deployed – sometimes – as much for personal delight as for monetary reward; the frequent and unremarked movement from journeyman to master and back (a feature which whets our appetite for work to come on social mobility in Caversham); differently gendered understandings

of what skill comprised. We see these issues touch and separate as folk bustle about their everyday lives, unaware that they will be subject to intense scholarly scrutiny a century hence. Photographs give us a vivid sense of (some) people's singularity; maps give the non-Dunedinite a sense of where we are in a landscape redolent with meanings at once highly particular and widely shared. If Erik Olssen finds himself seduced by these people on occasion, if the faintest rosy mist drifts across his text, then who could blame him? His narrative is seductive, particularly for leftists (of varied stripe) mourning the world we have lost. Olssen is too polite to insist on it, but *Building the New World* gives the quietest to Fairburn's atomisation thesis. Caversham throbs with, and through, community. More than that, however, it was in little places like Caversham, in all those lodge meetings and branch meetings, in all those contested daily negotiations as broad categories of age, skill, gender and (no more than occasionally here) ethnicity were shaped and hammered to particular patterns of experience, that the civic and political culture which came to maturity in the first Labour government was born. *Si monumentum requisit, we might say ruefully, as we view that world's ruins, circumspice.*

A sociologist, I now have read this book four times, in draft and in its finished form. Each time I close it having learnt new things, and I find myself filled with renewed gratitude to the author for his long labours so triumphantly concluded. C. Wright Mills once said that good sociology would be found where biography intersects history. On that criterion – which few would dispute – Erik Olssen has written not only the most significant locality-based piece of social history ever produced in New Zealand, but also its finest sociological monograph.

IAN CARTER

BOOK REVIEW

The Radio Years: A History of Broadcasting in New Zealand, Volume One by Patrick Day

Auckland University Press in association with the Broadcasting History Trust, 1994

A convincing case could be made for the proposition that public radio broadcasting has had a greater effect upon social and cultural life in New Zealand than any other government service. A multitude of insignificant settlements clustering about marketing and information centres provided only a rudimentary urban culture. Literature, theatre, music, the visual arts, social analysis, political instruction needed active promotion from the centre. Broadcasting offered a unique vehicle. Patrick Day, a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Waikato who has a particular interest in the

history of the media, is well-placed to record in the volume under review the course of broadcasting policy up to the introduction of television. A second volume to complete the story is promised.

Of course, New Zealand's experience raised questions that had to be answered in every community. Would there be legislative regulation of broadcasting? The universal answer was yes. The capacity to influence public opinion irresponsibly made this inevitable. Subject to this regulation, should entrepreneurs set up private stations to compete in the open market for the advertising dollar? If public institutions were to be granted outright monopolies to broadcast programmes, what form of executive responsibility and public scrutiny should be installed to ensure the impartiality and quality of programmes? What would justify control over public resources to the legislature? Should a mixed system authorising trading in advertising services by statutory institutions be established? If so what form of supervision would be required? Patrick Day's text is instructive on all these points for the simple reason that meddling by successive governments in New Zealand has demonstrated just about everything that can go wrong.

The era of false starts on broadcasting reform appears to be over. There seems to be agreement about the sale of public commercial stations at present under public ownership and the establishment of national, public non-commercial services similar to those of comparable bodies in moderate parliamentary systems elsewhere.

Much remains to be done. While we may expect that the achievements of Australia, Canada and England will guide the reformers, there is much of value in the lively record of non-commercial public broadcasting in New Zealand. Patrick Day records the achievements of the first Director-General of the National Broadcasting Service, Sir James Shelley, a charismatic Professor of Education, who saw the opportunity to build central institutions such as a national symphony orchestra. Does the record suggest that, when it comes to the crunch, the politicians will provide adequate executive authority to a figure comparable to Shelley? Will the new board of management have the power and independence to report directly to Parliament? Will the budget be supported by a multi-partisan resolution?

We must hope that the second volume will not be long delayed. Those who do not know their history are condemned to repeat it. Quite frankly, that possibility fills this reviewer with despair.

JOHN ROBERTS