

Jewish Women in New Zealand.

Reviewed by Nelson Wattie

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Livia Käthe Wittmann.

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If we had no means of classing things, human thought would be unthinkable—humankind cannot bear too much particularity. Whether the classes we use for thought exist objectively, or are construed by the perceiving mind or indeed are a mixture of both objectivity and experience is a question particular philosophers may well have answered for themselves but one which continues to vex philosophy. Are kowhai bushes or trees? Is a particular kowhai a bush or a tree? Can we answer objectively, or only by reaching intersubjective consensus? To what extent does the word itself create the category? If it does so, how does it do so?

Such questions can be troublesome enough applied to objects, but when we come to human beings, our trouble is even greater, largely because they answer back. While we are classing them, they are classing us and, even more perplexing, themselves. Salvador de Madariaga y Rojo once compared a person defining a foreign nation to someone standing on the deck of a ship moving at uncertain speed in a storm trying to assess the speed and movements of another ship, also travelling. The theory of relativity might help one judge the movements of physical objects, but where is the theory of cultural relativity?

What, to be particular, is a Jewish woman? Perhaps the question has to be broken down, particularised: what is a Jew? what is a woman? But would the person so classed accept such a breakdown? Or would she prefer to see herself as a whole, a unique individual from whom it is not at all possible to extract her Jewishness or her womanhood?

This way the human class has of answering back and questioning its fellows' definition of it throws the whole question into a political furnace, perhaps the fiercest political furnace of all. If we assign qualities to Jewishness and check the individual to see whether those qualities are present or not in an individual, we run the risk of including people in our category who refuse to be there or of excluding others who insist on being there. Passions are aroused and conflict seems inevitable. Image and self-image can diverge and the results can be catastrophic.

In the face of such risks one might feel tempted to dismiss the whole issue. 'What does it matter', we say, 'whether a person is a Jew or not? It is their human qualities that are important.' But how long can we maintain that stance? Total generality is as inimical to thought as total particularity. We all know that Jews—Maori, Samoans, Americans . . . —exist, and we will go on acting accordingly. Indeed we need such categories to be able to think and therefore act reasonably at all.

Livia Käthe Wittmann pursues the only reasonable course. She problematizes the issue instead of defining it. She refuses to say who Jewish women are, yet acts in the knowledge that they exist and can be spoken to. And she asks them about their self-image and their own understanding of what it means to be a Jew in New Zealand, a woman in New Zealand. Each has a story to tell and Wittmann lets it be told before she makes categories. Her thematic arrangement of the stories is subtle and meaningful without arbitrarily imposing a rigid pattern.

She has to start somewhere, of course, and the questions she asks do indeed suggest a preconceived pattern, but the answers to the questions are given their own living space and are not forced into the preconception.

The two basic complexes treated here, roughly in equal parts of the book, are what it means to be a Jew in New Zealand and what it means to be a woman in New Zealand. Naturally the two are not rigidly exclusive and are permitted to interact with each other. (Is this what the title means?—I'm not sure.) Wittmann is clearly concerned with the categorical, even authoritarian implications of the term 'bicultural' as it is frequently used in New Zealand. Pakeha or Maori? If you are neither, what then? Are you not a New Zealander no matter when you arrived here or if you were born here? The answers given by Wittmann's subjects are extremely diverse. None identifies totally with Maori and none with Pakeha but the spectrum between those extremes seems to be filled at every point. Similarly, the spectrum from dependence and patriarchal subordination (the two can be distinguished) to total isolation is widely covered although its extreme ends remain unoccupied.

What this amounts to is a series of stories, and a good story is always particular and individual; yet it can in its turn be classified (as genre experts demonstrate) and here the stories are gently and tolerantly placed into a sequence that gives the book a shape of its own. This shape is given another dimension by the wise and erudite musings of Wittmann herself, who places the stories in a broader context of image studies and gender analysis (Wittmann calls it feminism but admits that the term can be readily misunderstood, as it is by many of her subjects).

What does this book offer a non-Jewish male, like myself? The question of being a Jewish woman is not fundamentally different from that of being a

Pakeha male. It is a particular instance of a more general human question—a question that can neither be answered nor ignored. The particularity can add ‘colour’ and interest to a topic that really concerns any of us. Anyone interested in the diversity of life in New Zealand or in the problems we have in thinking about ourselves, no matter what categories we may feel apply to us, will find stimulus and interest in the multiple voices of this book.

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