

*A Man Who Moved New Zealand.*

*Reviewed by Bernie Napp.*

*A Man Who Moved New Zealand.* Simon Nathan. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005.

My most vivid memory of Harold Wellman was on a geology field trip to Red Rocks on Wellington's south coast in 1983. Of what he said about the lavas, cherts and argillites, I remember little – I was too busy fishing an octopus out of a rock pool – but there was a presence about him that has made a lasting impression. We didn't know him really, he was an emeritus professor when we were students, but we knew who he was, one of the pioneers of plate tectonics in New Zealand. He had a paper-strewn desk in the Cotton Building, decorated with a large, sawn offcut of greenstone. Now his life is remembered in a well-crafted biography by geologist and writer, Simon Nathan.

Mr Wellman discovered the nature of the Alpine Fault – that North-West Nelson had been separated from Fiordland by 480km along the fault was a revolutionary notion in 1948. It came to him on a "wet Sunday afternoon" when he grabbed a pair of scissors, cut the geological map along the fault line and found that the two massifs of old rock made more sense when brought together.

Tanned and leathery, he was a character in many ways. In 1969 the geology department at Victoria University held a 60th birthday party for Harold Wellman, then an associate professor. On becoming somewhat merry, he and some students rolled a large boulder down Kelburn Parade. "Well, if you organise surprise parties you have to expect surprises," he told a consternated Prof Bob Clark. The incident was not out of character, Simon Nathan reports, nor did it do Harold Wellman any harm. Later that year he was invested with a "personal chair" and a salary to go with it.

*A Man Who Moved New Zealand* is full of nuggets about Harold Wellman and his life, and if you sometimes have to dig for them, there are numerous maps, diagrams and photos for company through the 272 pages.

The early life of Harold Wellman holds a special fascination, and occupies the first part of the book. Told in the first person, this competently-edited memoir carries the old man's turn of phrase; it sings like a boiling billy in a makeshift hut, recalling a long bygone pioneer age in New Zealand. The Depression years

saw him wandering West Coast beaches prospecting for gold in black sands and steep, shingly rivers, and surviving mainly on sausages and spuds, with the odd eel for variation. "To be self sufficient we had to carry more than we could in two normal backpacks. The answer was for each of us to use two large hemp sacks with half the load in front and half the load behind. When crossing rivers, we must have looked like kittens about to be drowned."

Harold Wellman had had to leave his surveying job in Auckland, which included resurveying the Napier region after the earthquake. Born in Devonport, England, and raised in the genteel and well-worn countryside of England's southwest, New Zealand was a wild place to be explored when he arrived as an 18-year-old, with his family in 1927.

Forty years later, Simon Nathan came into contact with Harold Wellman's work when posted with the New Zealand Geological survey to Greymouth. He came across several reports of Wellman's while compiling an oil exploration study. The contact with his work continued off and on over the years and eventually the author decided to document his achievements and what he was like as a person. In this, Simon Nathan has succeeded but a small note of caution is sounded.

Parts of the book are, perhaps, more suited to the geologist or geology student, to people who knew or know of Harold Wellman. That said, there is plenty for the general reader, insights into the mind and personality of an unusual man, a maverick almost, a hard-case drinker, field worker, devoted husband, a man of integrity, and a teacher and supervisor of many students during his long career at Victoria University. There's a lot to be learned about his attitude to life as well – he was by Simon Nathan's and other accounts, a provocative man, the kind of person that you could not ignore, the kind of person who is well worth reading about.

If there is one regret on my part, it's not having had any personal contact with Harold Wellman when there was an opportunity, but this book goes a long way to building a bridge to a remarkable man.