

Voting, Working, and Dying in the Land of the Long White Cloud: Three Studies on the History of New Zealand

FAIRBURN, Miles, and OLSSSEN, Erik (eds.) — *Class, Gender and the Vote: Historical Perspectives from New Zealand*. Dunedin (New Zealand): University of Otago Press, 2005. Pp. 288.

OLSSSEN, Erik, and HICKEY, Maureen — *Class and Occupation: The New Zealand Reality*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2005. Pp. 317.

RICE, Geoffrey W. — *Black November: The 1918 Influenza Pandemic in New Zealand* (revised and enlarged second edition). Christchurch (New Zealand): University of Canterbury Press, 2005. Pp. 327.

The recent publication of Erik Olssen's and Maureen Hickey's *Class and Occupation: The New Zealand Reality*, and of the work edited by Miles Fairburn and Erik Olssen, entitled *Class, Gender and the Vote: Historical Perspectives from New Zealand*, along with the much-anticipated republication of Geoffrey W. Rice's *Black November: The 1918 Influenza Pandemic in New Zealand*, should be welcomed by the historical community. The products of some of New Zealand's most noted and influential scholars and, in the case of *Class and Occupation* and *Class, Gender and the Vote*, two major university-based quantitative research projects, these texts employ in-depth quantitative research to explore large-scale social and biological phenomena that affected New Zealand from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. In doing so, they usefully contribute to the academy's understanding of the character and experience of a number of facets of New Zealand society as New Zealand evolved from colony to country.

A collection of 12 articles written by members of the University of Canterbury's New Zealand Working Class Conservatism Project (NWCC) and the University of Otago's Caversham Project (CP), *Class, Gender and the Vote* presents an exploration of the myriad facets of class, social stratification, and electoral patterns in New Zealand from the late nineteenth through to the mid-twentieth century. Topics covered include residential segregation in the city of Christchurch during the inter-war period; the influence of age, ethnicity, and sex on marriage patterns in the southern suburbs of the city of Dunedin; the impact of gender on

voting participation; the role schooling played in social mobility; and whether or not the multifarious upheavals experienced by New Zealand between 1911 and 1951 (such as the two world wars, the influenza pandemic, and the great depression) left their mark on New Zealand's social structure. Ten of the authors base their investigations on the quantitative analysis of systematic data sources such as street directories, electoral rolls, and church records. The two exceptions to this rule — Lydia Bloy's "Class in the Eye of the Beholder in 1930s and 1940s New Zealand Society" and Seren Wendelken's "Visual Constructs of Wealth in the *Maoriland Worker*, 1911–12: Cartoon and Intertext" — come from the realm of cultural history and use images to interrogate the way New Zealanders perceived class in their respective periods of study. Although these works may initially seem out of place in such a collection, their addition strongly reflects the editors' belief that "quantitative historians cannot do their job properly if they are insensitive to the cultural context [in which their data is created]" (p. 13). Many of the quantitative studies presented in the volume reveal this stance, acknowledging the social and political values that infuse and colour their data.

The result is a well-researched and exceptionally informative collection that raises questions regarding commonly held beliefs about New Zealand's history. For example, although Michael Smith's "Residential Segregation and the Inter-war Christchurch Experience" supports earlier historiographical commentaries (and past and present public perceptions) about the class characteristics of the districts of the city, it also demonstrates that there were frequent exceptions and substantial variation within each district. In "Did Farmers Really 'Lurch towards the Left' in 1935? Reassessing the Election of New Zealand's First Labour Government", Steve McLeod strikes an even stronger cord. Based on an examination of electoral rolls and polling booth returns from ten rural electorates in New Zealand's North Island (the country's dairy farming heartland), McLeod strongly questions New Zealand historiography's long-held convention that New Zealand's first labour government was swept to power by small farmers lurching to the left.

While the articles presented in *Class, Gender and the Vote* offer reconsiderations of commonly held beliefs, their very nature as articles, which limits the depth and breadth their authors can cover, means that some compelling questions are left unexplored. For example, after reading "Educating the Elite? Otago Boys High School Father and Sons, 1863–1903", one wonders what results Howard Baldwin would have found if he had compared the role played by both Dunedin's Otago Boys' High School (OBHS) and the Christchurch Boys' High School (CBHS) in their students' social mobility rather than simply focusing on OBHS. Although sharing OBHS's mantle as a socially elite state school, CBHS likewise shared its status as a bastion for Christchurch's privileged with the privately run, and older, Christ's College, Canterbury. What made

some families choose CBHS and others Christ's College? Was it simply a financial decision, or were their selections based on other considerations? How did attending one or the other of these institutions affect a boy's future social mobility and his social identification? These questions are all the more compelling in light of the fact that both schools are known for their extensive old boys' networks, multiple generational attendance, and intense rivalry — both on and off the rugby field.

Equally, although McLeod's study of the North Island dairy farmer vote does offer compelling evidence to reconsider long-held beliefs about the character of the small farmers' vote in New Zealand's 1935 general election, one would have liked to see some exploration of returns from rural electorates in South Island. Admittedly, this would have required the author to cast his evidentiary net beyond dairy farming, as the South Island's dairying population was small and widely dispersed in 1935. However, the resulting data would have allowed McLeod to ascertain whether South Island farmers were as conservative as their North Island brethren in 1935, or whether they did in fact "lurch to the left".¹

These criticisms are minor, however, and indicate the important impetus provided by Baldwin and McLeod, as well as the other authors represented in *Class, Gender and the Vote*, for generating further research.

A useful foil for *Class, Gender and the Vote* comes in the form of Erik Olssen's and Maureen Hickey's *Class and Occupation: The New Zealand Reality*. A child of the CP, *Class and Occupation* is "the first systematic attempt to identify New Zealand's occupational structure from 1893–1938". Based on a detailed exploration of the city of Dunedin's Caversham borough, the work explores a broad spectrum of issues such as social stratification, social mobility, the role of gender in the work force, and the evolution of the concept of "class" and "professionalism" in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century New Zealand. It also addresses how best to track and code occupational and social change across time.

Researchers will find much use in this text, as it is as epistemologically challenging as it is informative. The authors discuss the methodological and theoretical problems CP researchers encountered during the project's lifetime. For example, the authors provide an informative discussion of the

1 In 1935, only 12 per cent of New Zealand's dairy herd resided on the South Island. This statistic remained relatively stable until the 1990s, when, due to a number of factors, dairy farming became more common on the South Island. At the time of New Zealand's 2002 agricultural production census, the South Island contained approximately 25 per cent of New Zealand's dairy herd. Statistics New Zealand/Tatauranga Aotearoa, "Dairy Cattle Tables", *2002 Agricultural Production Census* [online], retrieved January 28, 2007 from <http://www.stats.govt.nz/tables/2002-ag-prod/default.htm>; Steve McLeod, "Did Farmers Really 'Lurch towards the Left' in 1935? Reassessing the Election of New Zealand's First Labour Government", in Fairburn and Olssen, eds., *Class, Gender and the Vote*, p. 146, n. 42.

challenges involved in constructing occupational categories and then assigning individual responses to these categories. Their concern in this instance was to construct a classification system that was not only reflective of New Zealand's unique conditions — both at a local and national scale — but also flexible enough to allow comparison across localities and with other countries. While this discussion will give readers much to consider, the most interesting aspect of this work, methodologically speaking, relates to the CP's sources. In New Zealand, unlike the majority of western countries, enumerators' returns were destroyed after they had been processed by the Census and Statistics Office, meaning that population researchers' traditional source of detailed information on individuals does not exist. CP researchers combated this problem through the employment of electoral rolls and street/business directories. While the authors note these sources do present their own problems — for example, “neither the electoral rolls nor the directories allowed men to be located in their conjugal families” — they convincingly demonstrate the usefulness of these sources for examining occupational structures and other interrelated topics.

Class and Occupation is equally useful on an informational level. For instance, the authors argue that early censuses often ignored or downplayed many characteristics of colonial New Zealand's work force because they reflected the social constructions, economic ideologies, and environmental characteristics of New Zealand's heavily industrialized imperial master, Great Britain, rather than colonial realities. For example, Olssen and Hickey note that the imperial government's request that enumerations be conducted across the Empire in early April (England's traditional census season) so that it might make comparisons between its colonial positions acted to skew New Zealand's census data. While traditional seasonal movements associated with the harvest were at a minimum during late March and early April in England (which was the reason the English General Register's Office preferred this period for conducting the census), quite the opposite was the case in New Zealand. As a result, important sections of New Zealand's colonial work force were rendered invisible. Shearers, a major occupation in an economy heavily founded on sheep farming, scarcely appeared in New Zealand's 1926 Census because the shearing season had ended before the census was taken in early April (pp. 36–37).

Likewise, traditional British notions of class infused within the census often collapsed in the face of colonial realities. Unlike Britain's, New Zealand's economy was primarily based on the family farm and handicraft production oriented to local markets. This meant that the distribution of property in New Zealand was not only more widely dispersed than in Britain, but also the distinction between employer and employee was generally much more blurred. In many cases, for example, factory owners worked the floor shoulder to jowl with their staff. Furthermore, the “law

of colonial necessity”, not to mention the lack of adequate qualifications and the impossibility of policing such standards (if standards were set at all), meant that ranks of many professions were frequently more porous in the colony and dominion than they were in Britain (pp. 74–78, 86).

Such observations about the role British social and economic characteristics played in the creation of the New Zealand census and the way in which these were, in turn, warped by the dominion’s realities, raise interesting questions not only about how censuses are constructed, but also about the influence the centre exerts over the way in which the periphery perceives and constructs its reality. More broadly speaking, the authors’ examination of how the frontier nature of New Zealand influenced employment and social stratification offers much for comparison with other colonial societies.

The discussion of colonial New Zealand, however, also highlights a major flaw in this study. In an attempt to judge the typicality of Caversham’s urban occupational structure within the New Zealand context, researchers excised all rural occupations encountered in the study area from the project’s final analysis. The authors defend the decision to do so on the following grounds: first, rural occupations do not belong in the study of urban occupations; secondly, rural occupations are so internally heterogeneous that they sit uncomfortably in a modern occupational structure; finally, a high proportion of farm-related jobs were fluid, flexible, seasonal, and casual — hence, the “snapshot effect” of the census would engender “much more of a distortion” of rural society than of urban society. However, by removing rural occupations from the final analysis, the project would seem to have masked a significant facet of colonial New Zealand’s urban character. Many urban centres during this period contained primary industries — such as market gardening — within their borders. Moreover, during the early twentieth century up to 12 per cent of household heads, some in New Zealand towns, had their occupation recorded as farmer.² Many of these individuals had considerable economic and political power, and thus to overlook them is to overlook a socially significant section of the urban population. Equally, the authors’ second and third reasons for not including rural occupations could also be applied to a number of urban occupations. Labouring jobs were, for example, often flexible and seasonal, and it can often be difficult to place some of the more obscure urban occupations of yesteryear into modern occupational structures. Despite these flaws, *Class and Occupation* still offers important insights into the way in which New Zealanders’ perceptions of class and occupations were moulded by their colonial reality, and also into how these perceptions changed over time as New Zealand’s society “matured”.

2 Miles Fairburn and S. J. Haslett, “Stability and Egalitarianism”, in Fairburn and Olssen, eds., *Class, Gender and the Vote*, p. 18.

While Olssen and Hickey offer a useful exploration of the nature of New Zealand's occupational structure in the first half of the twentieth century, the revised and enlarged second edition of Geoffrey Rice's *Black November: The 1918 Influenza Pandemic in New Zealand* presents us with an insightful examination of the effect of the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic on the dominion. Originally published in 1988, *Black November* was the first work in the world to subject all the death certificates of a country's victims of the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic to in-depth examination and analysis. Ground-breaking as the work was, it did not, due to size constraints, contain the myriad eyewitness accounts, photographs, and cartoons Rice had collected while following the pandemic as it swept across New Zealand in the summer of 1918. Rice's repeated attempts to have these sources published in a companion volume came to naught, as New Zealand publishers felt the 750 copies of *Black November* printed, all of which sold out within a year, had satiated the small New Zealand market's interest in the country's experience of the Spanish flu. Current concerns about the possibility of another, potentially much more devastating, pandemic in the wake of the rise of the H5N1 Asian Bird flu, coupled with scholarly interest in *Black November* generated by Rice's subsequent work on the 1918–1919 pandemic, led the University of Canterbury Press to republish the volume in its current form.³

The revised edition of *Black November* includes many of the eyewitness accounts, photographs, and cartoons Rice had gathered and had previously been unable to publish, as well as three additional chapters that explore, in turn, what was known about influenza before 1918, the Great War's impact on the spread and impact of the disease, and recent discoveries made about the virus in the last decade. The result is a compelling study that both offers important insights into New Zealand's experience of the pandemic and effectively demonstrates a successful coupling of quantitative and qualitative sources and approaches.

Rice not only disproves the long-held belief that the deadly flu strain entered New Zealand on the Royal Mail liner *Niagara* when it brought Prime Minister William Massey back to the dominion after attending a

3 Tim Appenzeller, "Tracking the Next Killer Flu", *National Geographic*, October 2005, pp. 2–31; Geoffrey W. Rice and Edwina Palmer, "A Japanese Physician's Response to Pandemic Influenza: Ijro Gomibuchi and the 'Spanish flu' in Yaita-Cho, 1918–1919", *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 66 (1992), pp. 560–576; Geoffrey W. Rice and Edwina Palmer, "Pandemic Influenza in Japan, 1918–19: Mortality Patterns and Official Responses", *Journal of Japanese Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2 (Summer 1993), pp. 389–420; Geoffrey W. Rice, "Japan and New Zealand in the 1918 Influenza Pandemic: Comparative Perspectives on Official Responses and Crisis Management", in H. Phillips and D. Killingray, eds., *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918–19: New Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 73–85. Rice and Palmer's work is the first in-depth academic study of Japan's experience of the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic to be published in English.

war conference, but also offers compelling evidence that the official mortality figures require significant upward revision. This is especially true in the case of New Zealand's indigenous Māori population, whose death rate was, Rice's evidence suggests, almost twice the official rate published in 1919. If Rice's estimates are correct, and there is little to suggest they are not, then the Māori suffered one of the highest recorded death rates of any people affected by the influenza pandemic.

Rice's data also raise questions regarding the veracity of a number of commonly held assumptions about the nature of the flu pandemic. For example, while Rice notes that, as is to be expected, the majority of the victims of the pandemic were from New Zealand's urban population, he argues that the slums and ghettos of New Zealand's major cities were no more dangerous than their more well-to-do districts.

It is not, however, Rice's extensive quantitative analysis that makes *Black November* a truly compelling piece of scholarship. Rather, it is the way Rice expertly marries his quantitative data with myriad qualitative sources including oral histories, reports from all levels of government, and personal letters. The effect of this marriage is gratifying for three major reasons. First, it allows Rice to offer explanation for some of the phenomena his quantitative data reveal. For example, by exploring and comparing different cities' responses to the epidemic, Rice is able to advance some explanation as to why some cities seem to have been hit much harder than others, and, in relation, why he believes New Zealand's participation in the Great War enabled communities to put measures into place much more effectively to combat the epidemic and care for its victims. Rice's approach also allows him to explore how the New Zealand government's initial (lack of) reaction to the flu interplayed other events such as, for example, how Armistice celebrations and annual regional fairs aided the diffusion of the virus. Moreover, in relation to New Zealand's indigenous Māori population, Rice is able to employ qualitative data not only to explore how Pakeha (New Zealand European) racism had a great impact on Māori mortality rates, but also how the non-compliance of some *iwis* (tribes/clans) — in protest against conscription — with the government's attempts to collect statistical data has made calculating exact Māori mortality rates exceedingly difficult.

Secondly, Rice's integrated approach enables him to add a very human face to a deadly epidemic that his quantitative data trace sweeping across the country in November 1918. Indeed, mortality statistics, while stunning in and of themselves, are given further weight by descriptions of cities and smaller municipalities that became ghost towns seemingly overnight and tragic stories of families being decimated by the effects of the virus. Furthermore, it also provides a conduit through which to explore the ways in which people reacted to the epidemic that cannot, if at all, be traced by quantitative data. For instance, one subject interviewed by Rice noted that cigarette smoking became popular during the epidemic

because “people believed it acted as a disinfectant”, while many others provided vivid descriptions of the symptoms they and their family members suffered while infected with the disease.

Rice’s argument and evidentiary basis is strong and his analysis is well considered. In presenting his quantitative data, Rice is quick to acknowledge its limitations — such as the aforementioned problems with collecting complete records relating to the Māori. Moreover, Rice also readily concedes the limitations of his evidence’s explanatory ability, more often than not offering suggested, rather than exact, answers to many of the questions, such as the cause of the pandemic, with which he engages. Such caution is to be applauded, as it is indicative of the author’s recognition of scholars’ ultimate inability to provide definitive answers to some of the questions they explore.

More widely speaking, *Black November* is also compelling because it hints at paths historians might take in future in studying the 1918–1919 flu pandemic and other epidemic diseases such as polio. Specifically, one wonders if the approaches used by Rice could provide the foundations for an international research project. Such a project would, due both to its size and its multi-national character, require a team of researchers and the resources of a number of institutions. However, the benefits of such a study would far outweigh its costs, as it would offer new insights about the spread of past pandemics while allowing close comparisons of the experiences of different countries and regions.

In relation, *Black November* also indicates, albeit obliquely, the usefulness of cross-disciplinary exchange. Rice openly acknowledges the debt his study owes to the expert advice he received from Dr. Lance Jennings, New Zealand’s leading expert on influenza epidemics, and his bibliography contains scholarly articles from the field of medicine. That Rice both consulted Jennings and delved into medical texts is unsurprising, as more than a passing knowledge of virology is key to understanding how circumstances aided or hindered the flu’s diffusion across the country. Such knowledge also allows Rice to explain how the disease affected its victims, including why the skin of those killed by the disease turned a deep purple-black as they succumbed.

This exchange is a two-way street. Both Rice’s study and the others he discusses in his final chapter, “Influenza after 1918”, offer much useful information for health care professionals preparing to combat future crises. These sources have not been ignored. The 1998 conference that instigated the rebirth of *Black November* not only included historians, geographers, and demographers, but also virologists, physicians, and nurses. Moreover, in 2003 Rice was invited to address a conference of New Zealand’s National Influenza Immunization Strategy Group in the nation’s capital.

If one quibble must be made in relation to *Black November*, it can be found in the layout of the book. Designed, as a result of New Zealand’s

limited book market, for a non-academic as well as an academic audience, the book contains a number of story boxes, similar to those found in many contemporary history textbooks, littered throughout the text. While this does not negatively affect Rice's analysis, it does tend to break up the readability of the work, as the boxes tend to intrude into the text. In this respect it would have been better if such reminiscences had been incorporated into the text or placed in a reference appendix at the end of the work.

In sum, the three works examined here make worthy additions to a researcher's bookshelf. The insights they provide will be of use to those interested in the economic, social, political, and demographic evolution of New Zealand and colonial societies more generally. In particular, they tender strong grounds for a reconsideration of a number of commonly held assumptions about more than one event in New Zealand's past, and the complex ways in which the colony and its colonial master interacted and influenced each other.

The three texts also present much food for thought on an epistemological level. The imbedded discussions of best research practices will give scholars much to consider about systematic data collection and interpretation. More broadly, all three studies graphically demonstrate the value of employing both quantitative and qualitative sources concurrently in research. In an era when historians are increasingly questioning the divide between quantitative and qualitative approaches to the past, this is, perhaps, their greatest contribution.⁴

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4 On this point, see Chad Gaffield, "Evidence of What? Changing Answers to the Question of Historical Source as Illustrated by Research Using the Census", in Jeff Keshen and Sylvie Perrier, eds., *Building New Bridges: Sources, Methods and Interdisciplinarity* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2005), pp. 265–274.