

Presbyterians in Aotearoa 1840-1990. Edited by Dennis McEldowney. Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, Wellington, 1990. 203 pp. NZ price: \$39.00.

THOUGH the Presbyterians are the last of the major churches to produce an up-to-date history, this one has been worth the wait. The five authors, each choosing a thirty year period, have painted an interesting picture of the history of the Presbyterian church in Aotearoa. Compared with earlier denominational histories, which focused largely on clergy, there is more here on previously neglected groups: Maori, women, and the laity in general. The expected topics — the Scottish Calvinist heritage, the Otago settlement, prohibition, the Bible Class Movement — are all dealt with competently.

Technically, the book is excellent. Over 120 well-chosen black and white photos and illustrations, and regular mini-essays enliven the text. I could find only two typographical errors. From a scholar's point of view the publisher's decision not to include references, but instead to deposit them in major libraries, is annoying.

Certain themes recur in each chapter. All keenly criticized the church's sexism. Peter Matheson's elegant portrayal of the settler church included the story of Elizabeth Stewart, admonished by her Edinburgh kirk session for being raped! Yet most managed also to appreciate the contributions in home and church of women who accepted a traditional, restricted role. In this there was a refreshing freedom from that condescending presentism which would pity or ignore those women in the past who failed to subscribe to standards of emancipation prized by late-twentieth century feminists.

Contributors make no bones about Presbyterian attitudes toward Maori. Matheson asserts that the vast majority were silent about racial injustice in the period 1840-1870. Lack of interest and neglect is how Ian Breward, in a masterly chapter, characterizes attitudes between 1870-1901. In the twentieth century recognition was gradually given to Maori grievances, though a gap remained between liberal thinkers on the Public Questions Committee and conservative lay people.

A third refrain is cultural narrowness. Matheson speaks of 'unreflected middle-class values, of paternalist attitudes to women and working-class people'; Laurie Barber of the greatest weakness of the Church being its 'middle class values'. The problem here is that criticizing the church for its 'middle class values' may prove cryptic and confusing to non-academic readers, who might fairly ask: 'What's wrong with honesty, decency and hard work?' The sacralization of bourgeois values was not explained clearly enough for ordinary readers unfamiliar with academic shorthand.

Most authors concentrate on what Presbyterians said and did, on their works. The inner, psychological dimensions of piety, explored so arrestingly in Maurice Gee's *Plumb*, are less evident, except in the nineteenth century chapters. Of course Presbyterians have not been much given to introspection and self-analysis. They have been more concerned with works of every variety — economic success, missions, prohibition, evangelism, social justice — than with faith and spirituality. Perhaps the Presbyterian obsession with keeping up appearances and public righteousness and the comparative neglect of a spirituality of joy, gentleness and charity might have made an interesting theme, one pertinent to the wider society as well. In any event, more analysis of the spirituality of Presbyterianism (or lack of it) — of the emotional dynamics of Presbyterian family life, for example — might have made the book more interesting to ordinary readers.

Authors' opinions are occasionally obtrusive. Laurie Barber's sympathies for those at the conservative end of the theological spectrum are distinctly limited, for instance. Revivalists had a considerable impact on the church in the period 1900-1920, though 'whether for good or not' is for Barber a decidedly moot point. He describes the simple

theology of most lay Presbyterians as not only 'child-like' but, more pejoratively, 'childish'.

I found James Veitch's chapter '1961-1990: Towards the Church for a New Era' the most difficult. In order to explain the Presbyterian adherence crisis of the last thirty years he invokes a 'completely new era in history' beginning in about 1960 which followed 'the emergence of a completely new understanding of the nature of the world'. There are problems here. First, long and complex historical processes, like the industrial and technological revolutions, are hugely compressed to create an artificial and unhistorical sense of overwhelmingly rapid change. Second, Veitch's concept of a 'completely new understanding of the nature of the world' rendering traditional theological formulations obsolete, though beloved of avant garde theologians, is historically dubious. Recent work in the history of science-and-religion has cast considerable doubt on the idea that the modern scientific understanding of the world undermined traditional religious and philosophical beliefs. These problems make the explanation of the crisis of Presbyterianism shaky as well as vague.

Whereas church histories in the past tended to be triumphalist, this one tended to smack instead of guilt-ridden white male liberal Presbyterianism — an agonizing combination these days. All the contributors criticized the Church for its racism, sexism and insularity. While there is plenty to feel guilty about, and no case for a return to the uncritical triumphalist church history of the past, there is perhaps not sufficient appreciation of the strengths, virtues and accomplishments of Presbyterianism. Matheson, Breward and Davidson came closest to striking the balance, but this history would, I think, tend to confirm those leaving the church in the wisdom of their decision, rather than to reconsider it. If the institutional church has a future — and presumably these contributors hope it has — then it may need more than self-criticism, healthy as that may be, to reverse current trends.

This said, this is an interesting, comprehensive readable history of Presbyterianism, which synthesizes the sources very well. An excellent addition to New Zealand religious history, it should be read not just by Presbyterians, but by anyone interested in the history of Aotearoa New Zealand.

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French Akaroa: An Attempt to Colonise Southern New Zealand. By Peter Tremewan. University of Canterbury Press, Christchurch, 1990. xx, 383 pp. NZ price: \$29.95.

FOR SIXTY YEARS, notwithstanding significant amplifications of detail and context by later researchers, Lindsay Buick's *The French at Akaroa* (1928) has remained the only substantial study of the Nanto-Bordelaise Company's efforts to establish a colony on Banks Peninsula in 1840. Now Peter Tremewan's *French Akaroa* does not merely correct Buick's errors and modify his perspectives but entirely supersedes the earlier work, which henceforth will have only historiographical and literary importance.

Tremewan, senior lecturer in French at the University of Canterbury, has built his study upon contemporary records, including, for the first time, a systematic exploration