

Singer in a Songless Land. A Life of Edward Tregear 1846-1931. By K.R. Howe. Auckland University Press, 1991. 241 pp. NZ price: \$39.95.

AT ONE POINT Kerry Howe comments upon the remarkable range of Tregear's activities. Few people in New Zealand can have been involved in so many: he was a minor poet, a scholar, an author, a prominent public servant, a political activist, a tireless publicist, a leading intellectual . . .

Of Tregear's early life little is known. He was born in Southampton and was clearly well-educated — he knew both Latin and Greek — but his father died and his mother brought her family out to New Zealand. Edward was seventeen.

He was under fire during the wars against the Maori and later served in the Armed Constabulary in the Waikato. He became a surveyor, spent much time with Maori and learned to speak their language. With Percy Smith, he was a co-founder of the Polynesian Society and spent endless time editing its journal as well as writing for it himself. He was also an active member of the Wellington Philosophical Society.

When he moved to Wellington in 1885 Tregear worked in the Survey Department. He was a friend of John Ballance, who found him the job. When the Liberals came to power, Tregear became head of the Bureau of Industries and then Secretary of Labour, with W.P. Reeves as the first minister. Tregear's job was finding work for the numerous unemployed. He was also soon at work administering Reeves's labour laws. For instance, inspectors had to travel about checking on conditions in factories. Tregear sometimes did this inspecting himself. When Reeves departed for London and Seddon became minister Tregear rarely saw him and virtually acted as minister.

Tregear's views on politics were very close to those of Ballance and Reeves. He was a 'state socialist', who believed that the state should have a paternal responsibility for all citizens. He equated socialism with state control. The state's role was to carry out social engineering through a centralized bureaucracy. Social life was to be regulated and disciplined.

Though radical himself — for instance, he believed in land nationalization — he detested the radical socialists, some of whom advocated the use of the general strike. He had an obsessional dislike of strikes and was largely responsible for the 1905 amendment to the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act, which made strikes illegal while an award was in force.

Howe demonstrates Tregear's importance as Secretary of Labour, but we do not really know how effective he was as an administrator. The Labour Department records were destroyed in two fires.

After Tregear retired in 1910 he devoted his formidable energies to uniting the warring Labour factions. He played an important role in the Unity Conferences of 1912 and 1913. He became president of the Social Democratic Party, which was destroyed when Massey and his 'Cossacks' broke the 1913 strike.

Howe emphasizes that Tregear was devoted to women's welfare and causes, but his attitudes seem to me ambivalent. He said that he was a 'humble worshipper' of the 'divine petticoat'! He wrote a novel in which all the men suddenly die except for Jack, who had been drugged by a tohunga. Civilization collapses without male muscle. When Jack wakes up, legislation is passed to make him have 20 wives. Jack finds his role oppressive and escapes with his childhood sweetheart. In real life Tregear seems to have had almost no sex life — his wife finding sex painful.

Kerry Howe seems to believe that a biographer should not judge. He quotes a great deal of Tregear's mediocre verse without comment. However, Howe has also edited a book,

The Verse of Edward Tregear, Palmerston North, 1989, in which he says that 'By present standards Tregear's poetry is not great literature, or even great New Zealand literature'. It is not great literature by any standards, though one of his poems has been anthologized.

Tregear's aim, Howe says, in both his verse and his studies, was the intellectual colonization of New Zealand, to discover our identity, to make singing in a songless land. Unfortunately his songs are tuneless.

Much of Tregear's life was devoted to Polynesian studies. In 1885 he published a book, *The Aryan Maori*. He was neither the first nor the last person to claim that the Maori were Aryan, but through his method of comparative philology, he took the idea to absurd lengths. He claimed that the Maori language preserved, 'in an almost inconceivable purity', the ancient Aryan language. It also held embalmed memories of animals and other things that the Maori had never seen. 'Kahui', flock or crowd — herd — for instance, was 'gau' or 'cow'. A.S. Atkinson ridiculed this notion, demonstrating, by Tregear's method, that the word 'kakapo' preserved the Aryan origins of a 'cock and bull' story. Howe defends Tregear when he calls this 'a most unfortunate criticism'. However, Tregear did more serious work. He was able to look to his *Maori-Polynesian Comparative Dictionary* (1891) for his 'remembrance'.

Kerry Howe's researches have been assiduous. Tregear's daughter told me in the 1950s that many of his papers were burned when her parents moved to Picton in 1921, but Howe has tracked down numerous manuscripts. The biography is well written and interesting, an important contribution to our rapidly advancing knowledge of late nineteenth and early twentieth century history.

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The Stratford Inheritance. By Ian Church. Stratford District Council, P O Box 320, Stratford, 1990. 264 pp. NZ price: \$39.00 + postage \$3.00.

THE WRITING of New Zealand local histories has been transformed in the last two decades by the influence of academics entering the field, and by the broadened expectations of local councils who often fund such works. However, *The Stratford Inheritance* stands firmly within the earlier tradition of local history writing, and exemplifies the limitations of that genre.

The history of Stratford is divided into four sections. Part One gives a brief summary of early Maori history, interesting for its outline of Maori tracks across Taranaki. There follows a contracted record of Maori conversions to Christianity, the wars and land sales. More space could have been given to this vital period.

Part Two (The Communities) follows the development of Stratford district in small geographical segments, sometimes treated road by road. While this method is perhaps appropriate to a district where each road radiating out from the Stratford centre became the core of a community, the rationale for this is not made explicit; the overall development of the county, its crises and changes, are obscured by the minutiae in this multiplication of mini-histories. The absence of a satisfying map makes it difficult for an outsider to trace the links in the pattern, and the significance of detailed information is undermined. Part Two concludes with a chapter on rural society which contains moving