

Howe argues that in the progression from wilderness to security, obscurity to influence, and exile to acceptance, Tregear epitomized the development of New Zealand nationalism, where colonizing is 'the sense of discovering, defining, examining, interpreting, understanding, occupying, organising, possessing, controlling: in a word, domesticating'.¹ A generation later Adkin, too, was similarly engaged in the domestication of the New Zealand landscape. In a variety of ways, his many interests related to the land and its structure.

One of the challenges of writing biography can be fitting the 'themes' into a 'life', making sense of a mass of detail and placing it in a historical as well as a personal context. Dreaver has succeeded on all counts. *An Eye for Country* is structured around a life chronology in which Adkin's personal life is deftly intertwined with his scholarly ambitions. 'The Interestingness of Existence' describes his first forays into the world of science, while the final 'Legacies' chapter recounts Adkin's contributions to New Zealand science. One chapter, simple titled 'Maud', gives an engaging portrayal of Adkin meeting his future wife and their subsequent courtship.

This stunning biography might well be subtitled 'An Eye for Detail', given the careful work of both its subject and its author. Beautifully produced, the book is studded with a selection of Adkin's photographs (worthy of a separate volume in themselves). In his portrait of Adkin as a self-taught scholar, driven by a pugnacious Kiwi spirit, Dreaver has made a real contribution to our cultural and intellectual history. The reader is left with a strong sense of Adkin's drive and determination, built on imagination and memory, unsupported by formal university training. 'What Adkin discovered was felt in the body, measured by an ache in the back and by dirt-begrimed hands, mentally sorted and polished during a prodigious day's work on the land, and recorded at midnight on a farmhouse table' (p.252).

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1 K. R. Howe, *Singer in a Songless Land: A Life of Edward Tregear 1846-1931*, Auckland, 1991, p.11.

Stick Out, Keep Left. By Margaret Thorn. Edited by Elsie Locke and Jacquie Matthews. Auckland University Press/Bridget Williams Books, Auckland, 1997. 130 pp. NZ price: \$29.95. ISBN 1-86940-143-3.

READING MARGARET THORN'S autobiography made me think about a good friend who died in 1997. Born a generation later than Thorn, Joy Colquhoun's life paralleled Thorn's in a number of ways. Both married, brought up three children, and were behind-the-scenes activists in the cause of women's health, economic justice and peace. Both believed passionately in socialism and were active in Labour party politics. Elsie Locke, the friend to whom Margaret Thorn entrusted her memoirs, comments in her introduction that she is 'fortunate in being able to revive the ear of memory'. I too can hear Joy's voice, and it transforms the dulllest of written records. In the case of both women, oral history may have preserved that articulate passion more effectively than a conventional, largely chronological autobiography. Despite this, the editors of *Stick Out, Keep Left* are to be congratulated on the meticulous annotation of the text, and the useful (if rather dry)

editorial description of events preceding each chapter, which contextualize Margaret Thorn's own more idiosyncratic account.

I began with the parallel between Joy Colquhoun and Margaret Thorn because both also represent the unrecorded and historically neglected contribution of women to the political life of the nation. The Labour party drew much of its community strength from the committees, bazaars, raffles, dances and meetings organized and sustained by the work of women. Margaret Thorn's record of her political activities on a weekly basis appears exhausting to contemporary readers. In this lies the historical importance of her autobiography: it reminds us of the essential, but largely hidden, role women played at a grassroots level in bringing Labour to power.

Margaret Thorn was born in Manchester, England in 1897, and the first chapter of the book records the family history. Her memories, reflecting direct experience and oral tradition, paint a compelling picture of working-class poverty and the vicissitudes wrought by alcohol over several generations. Despite this, her immediate family played musical instruments and avidly read the library of radical political thought bequeathed by her stepfather, a trade unionist. Margaret's continued breadth of reading is evident in the frequent literary allusions in her text. The struggle for self-education is one of the defining features of those who sought to improve living standards and opportunities for the working class during the first half of the century.

Driven by the ill-health of a brother, the family migrated to Australia in 1911 but no work could be found for her father, a highly skilled artisan. The following year the family moved on to New Zealand but their economic fortunes remained precarious. The family spent some time in Palmerston North, where Margaret began work as a waitress, joined the Social Democratic Party and took a course in economics at the Workers' Educational Association. Her membership of the SDP brought her into contact with James (Jim) Thorn, a union activist. He had just spent several years in Britain working with Clarion socialists, and returned just in time for the 1913 strike.

Margaret and Jim married in 1917, when she was 20 and he 35 years old. Her life subsequently largely revolved around the care of their three children, her own activities within the Labour party at grassroots level, and Jim Thorn's work as editor of the *Maoriland Worker*, Labour Party organizer, member of parliament for Thames and, finally, New Zealand High Commissioner in Canada. Throughout these years Jim Thorn spent lengthy periods away from home, but Margaret does not discuss the burden of loneliness implicit in his absences. Indeed, the story contains very few references to their domestic life.

Instead, the narrative focuses on the political and public history of socialist and Labour politics over these decades. Margaret Thorn proudly records the policies and achievements of the first Labour government. There are also some interesting observations about well-known Labour politicians, but the account lacks a critical perspective. It is difficult, as the editors point out, to understand this in the light of her own passionate socialist convictions and the later behaviour of, for example, Robert Semple or Peter Fraser. There are no insights into the deep ideological divisions among the members of the first Labour government. But perhaps this is not surprising: at one point she comments that Jim Thorn never broke caucus confidentiality over these years. That they 'used to bicker' over the 'compromise[s]' made by Labour is recorded, as is Margaret's advice to her husband: 'stick out, keep left, time will vindicate you'. But overall, Margaret's loyalty to her political comrades renders what should read as one of the triumphs of the twentieth century rather conventional and also colourless.

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