

Sir Keith Holyoake: Towards a Political Biography. Edited by Margaret Clark. The Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 1997. 209pp. NZ price: \$29.95. ISBN 0-86469-291-9.

KEITH SINCLAIR saw biographers as 'helping Salome to remove her veils'.¹ For this collection of papers delivered to a Stout Research Centre seminar on Keith Holyoake, Sinclair's second metaphor of peeling an onion is more accurate. Tears of frustration are shed in the reading, and there is no kernel to be found.

This is not entirely the contributors' fault. For someone who was the Prime Minister for so long, Holyoake has left remarkably little trace in New Zealand memory, and not only because his creed was 'steady does it'. His legendary reticence in committing himself to an opinion is amply rehearsed here. As George Laking puts it in a diplomatic memoir, 'He was always open to discussion . . . but that could be an unrewarding experience' (p.171). Holyoake annotated papers in a minimalist fashion which often left officials (and now leaves historians) mystified about his intentions. He seems to have been equally unforthcoming with his cabinet, getting others to state their views without doing so himself. It is to be regretted that no contributions could be obtained from ministerial colleagues.

Holyoake's public face dominates this book. He was a career politician — in 1941 he ensured this by persuading his party to help him buy land in a safe seat — for whom the highest priority was always 'the return of a National government by almost any means' (p.205). This predominantly involved skilful soothing of the electorate's 'hip-pocket nerve'. When the economy faltered or National's role as the 'safe' choice for voters temporarily lost its appeal, he could be anything but the 'smiling public man' of his ascendancy. Early in his career he had a talent for traditional Tory red-baiting; and Barry Gustafson's account of how he urged a reluctant Robert Muldoon to launch 'brutal' attacks on Norman Kirk and Bill Rowling is illuminating. This essay, on the relationship between Holyoake and his protege, Muldoon, portrays two men symbiotically connected by a hunger for office. Holyoake credited his 1969 election victory to Muldoon's ferocious campaigning, and returned the favour after the 1972 defeat by failing to support his successor, John Marshall, against Muldoon.

Holyoake's own mentor was Gordon Coates, whose assistance, he was convinced, had won him the Motueka by-election as a Coalition-Reform candidate in 1932.² Insofar as it is revealed in this book, Holyoake's philosophy of life was similar to Coates's. He 'advocated Keynesian-type spending to lift . . . the . . . country out of depression' (p.119), and suggested that New Zealand follow Roosevelt's example and use public works to develop the rural infrastructure. His rival, Sidney Holland, was supported by the new National Party's United and Democratic factions; United's supporters were more liberal economically than the Reformers, and favoured an alliance between government and business, while the Democrats emphasized individual freedom and accountability. Gustafson's second paper in this collection argues that Holyoake was a master at reconciling these tendencies.

Of Holyoake's private life there is little here beyond references to a devoted wife, their modest house with its listed telephone number, and his habit of answering the door in person. Ken Comber cannot be blamed for not being more revealing in his 'Personal Reflections on my Father-in-Law' — although I did admire the thirst for knowledge

1 Keith Sinclair, 'Political Biography in New Zealand', in Jock Phillips, ed., *Biography in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1985, pp.30–31. The veils, in order of increasing revelation, are the subject's public face, philosophy of life, private life, childhood, self-image, and subconscious mind.

2 Bruce Farland, *Coates' Tale*, Wellington, 1995, p.101.

which encouraged the Prime Minister to dig up a septic tank and open a dishwasher during its wash cycle to see how they worked.

Holyoake's childhood receives even less attention: a little from Comber, and half a paragraph in Tom Brooking's essay on 'The Farmer Politician in New Zealand', which also describes Holyoake's effectiveness as a Minister of Agriculture.³ Economic circumstances forced him to leave school at 12, which partly explains why we have next to nothing here about his view of himself: the self-taught Holyoake apparently never kept a diary. With respect to his psychological make-up, there is not even speculation: he had, after all, 'built a casing around himself' (p.18).

That Holyoake was essentially unknowable may be why most of the contributors have been economical with their energies: only a handful have done any primary research, and that while undertaking other projects. One of these, Roberto Rabel, sums up Holyoake as a 'dovish hawk' whose reluctance to commit New Zealand troops to South Vietnam seems to have resulted as much from parsimony as from perceptions of domestic political advantage and external security needs. John Martin and Pat Walsh contribute pieces on the state services and industrial relations respectively from which Holyoake is largely absent, while Antony Wood's lengthy survey of 'The Holyoake Years' is disappointingly superficial.

Some aspects of the book's production are also frustrating. The publisher has provided a cramped and unattractive typeface. There are editorial deficiencies: many of the pieces read as they were spoken; the same Holyoakean aphorisms appear majestically over and over again; there is no index; each author's referencing style has been retained. Worse still, Gustafson's two essays, like his history of the National Party, have no references.⁴ Perhaps he will one day remedy this by producing a 'political biography' of Keith Holyoake. Meanwhile, the veils have been lifted only a little.

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3 Derived from the only biography of Holyoake, Ross Doughty's hagiographic *The Holyoake Years*, Feilding, 1977.

4 Barry Gustafson, *The First 50 Years*, Auckland, 1986.

Nelson: A Regional History. By Jim McAloon. Cape Catley, Picton, 1997. 261 pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 0-908561-56-3.

EVER SINCE the publication of Ruth Allan's history of the early settlement of Nelson in 1965, Nelsonians have been waiting for a more comprehensive account of Nelson to the present day. Now, thanks to the Nelson City Council's determination to mark the sesquicentennial in 1992 with such a history, Jim McAloon has achieved this objective.

He has surveyed the history of human occupation of the province from the twelfth century to the 1990s. His emphasis is largely economic, each period into which the book is divided giving a detailed picture of the agriculture and industry upon which the prosperity of the settlement has been built. However, the cultural and recreational activities of the people have not been neglected, and the leading characters in the story have been brought vividly to life.

In his foreword, the mayor, Philip Woollaston, makes a particularly pertinent comment: