

Settler Kaponga 1881–1914: A Frontier Fragment of the Western World. By Rollo Arnold assisted by Betty Arnold. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1997. 383 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN 0-86473-329-1.

In 1981 Rollo Arnold published *The Farthest Promised Land*, a study of assisted English rural villagers who came to New Zealand in the 1870s. Thirteen years later *New Zealand's Burning* appeared. In it Arnold used the fires of the summer of 1885–86 to explore the new rural world his immigrants were creating, the way the yeoman farmers he had introduced us to in his earlier work were settling down. Now, in *Settler Kaponga*, he completes his trilogy, returning again to the rural 'folk' of Taranaki, but offering readers a far more detailed local study of how one community moved towards maturity as the outside world intruded and shaped the people who made Kaponga their home. Kaponga is, he argues, 'a frontier fragment of the Western world' (p.11) and *Settler Kaponga* is a microhistory, an incredibly detailed study of how the people of the area worked and played as the Victorian era gave way to the Edwardian period.

The structure of *Settler Kaponga* reflects Arnold's strong belief in change over time. In the first part of the book, the 1880s are the focus. This was a time of bush clearing, a time when the township was more a hope than a reality. By the second part of the book, the 1890s, the township is real and farms, rather than 'clearings', define the area. Dairy factories, ready to supply the British market, mark the local economy. The area is becoming more connected with 'the world' as the telegraph, letters and visits 'home' are enjoyed by Kaponga's folk. In the final part of the book, 1900–1914, the outside world is intruding on Kaponga in new and more decisive ways. While the town grows up and concerns itself with issues like sanitation and local governance, so it also faces the impact of movies screening at the local hall, men going overseas to fight in wars, the dairy industry developing and co-operatives forming to sell cheese on the British market. Kaponga may be a settler community but, Arnold argues, it is also part of the global system, it is a 'village world', a concept Arnold has used in his previous work.

Arnold's familiarity with the Taranaki area and with this period shine through in *Settler Kaponga*. Years of research mean he can offer a thick description of the local economy, especially the rise of dairying. A heavy reliance on the files of the *Hawera Star* also offer a mass of detail about public leisure in the area. Unlike so many local histories, Arnold tells us how the settlers of Kaponga played as well as earned their livings. In the final section, especially, the richness of community leisure is clear. The local rugby team may have struggled over the years, but soccer, cricket and, later, hockey were important sports, alongside tennis, athletics, shooting, community sports days, local shows, picnics, dances and balls. Also unlike many local histories, Arnold is aware that the children of the area were important members of the 'village world'. Their letters to Uncle Ned in the *Farmer* and their work at school and on the dairy farms receive attention here.

Yet in other ways *Settler Kaponga* is more like a traditional local history than Arnold's previous works. Despite the idea of Kaponga being a fragment of the Western world, in many places narrative detail takes over from analysis and the area's relationship with wider developments is lost. In the mould of so many of our local histories, roads, transportation and bush clearing are too often to the fore. While Peter Gibbons's point that local histories contain 'about as many names at the district's telephone directory' is not quite true of *Settler Kaponga*, there is a tendency to mention worthy locals, most of whom

are men.¹ Appendix 1 offers additional biographical notes on 43 of these notables, only one of whom is a woman. Arnold even includes an appendix listing the main office-holders in the community's institutions.

Arnold is aware of the very male-focused, public nature of his work, and tries to remedy this by including a section on 'Women and Girls in Edwardian Kaponga'. It seems a shame that their presence in Victorian Kaponga remains hidden, and curious that when they do appear it is as 'emancipated' women, who built on the franchise to bring about change in their lives and the lives of those around them. I remain unconvinced that women's greater role in running the local horticultural show is evidence of emancipation. Instead, Arnold's rather odd conclusion to the book, his 'confession of ignorance' regarding the lack of discussion of midwives and childbirth in the area (p.346), seems to me to say more about the place of women in the area and in this book than the few women who made it onto a local committee.

In his critique of local history writing, Gibbons argues that the 'writing-out of one people and the writing-in of another is a textual re-enactment as well as recapitulation of colonization'.² Few Maori appear in *Settler Kaponga* save for a brief discussion of Parihaka in the Epilogue. Maori, women and children have been colonized by Pakeha men here. Given that Arnold is writing about the area as a fragment of the wider world, perhaps this is appropriate, although there is little recognition by Arnold that this is what is occurring here.

In the absence of census manuscripts and extensive personal papers, to write such a detailed study of one small community is an impressive feat. Arnold, with the able assistance of his wife, Betty, must be commended. It is a pity, though, that the central idea behind the book, Arnold's notion of the 'village world', too often is swamped by a mass of detail.

CAROLINE DALEY

The University of Auckland

1 Peter Gibbons, 'Non-fiction', in Terry Sturm, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, Auckland, 1991, p.73.

2 *ibid.*, p.74.

To Bed at Noon. The Life and Art of Maurice Duggan. By Ian Richards. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1997. 476 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN 1-86940-159-X.

WHEN KEITH SINCLAIR surveyed 'New Zealand Literary History' in 1978, six of the seven publications reviewed were biographical.¹ Keith Ovenden's biography of Dan Davin, *A Fighting Withdrawal* (1996), Michael King's *Frank Sargeson* (1995), King's forthcoming biography of Janet Frame and Ian Richards' *To Bed at Noon* confirm that 20 years later New Zealand's literary history continues to be written through biography. It seems the biographical approach is the means through which such a history has been made

1 Keith Sinclair, 'Review Article: New Zealand Literary History', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 12, 1 (1978), pp.69-74.