The key thrust of *A Voice for Mothers* is contained in the title. Bryder makes a strong case for Plunket as a 'maternalist' organization grounded in the notion of sexual difference. Internationally, the term has been applied to women's groups that promoted the interests of women and children and in the process developed parallel power structures to the political and commercial spheres dominated by men. Although Plunket was founded by a man, Frederic Truby King, it gained the active support of talented, sometimes wealthy and educated women, who invested time, energy and resources into the work. Bryder argues that women made the decisions in branches, resisted Health Department control, and used their social networks in support of the Society. King is presented as 'a useful ally to the women who ran Plunket' (p.40), an ally who was shed once his deteriorating mental state made him an embarrassment to the cause. King and Plunket were not the same, she argues — once the Society was established, real power lay with the women on its Central Council who did not defer to male health professionals. Here again, a shift occurred in the late 1980s. As in many voluntary organizations, the president and her executive lost power to new appointees with managerial skills, a number of them men. The historically effective 'cocktail of influential women volunteers and medical experts' was no longer seen to be appropriate. The pool of capable women available to take on leadership roles was also reduced by the movement of paid women into the workforce and the alternative opportunities for influence that opened up at the end of the twentieth century.

Bryder's history provides a 'voice', not only for mothers, but for Plunket's ground-level workers, the Plunket nurses. Relationships between mothers and Plunket nurses were a critical element in Plunket's reception, and Bryder confirms, not surprisingly, that much depended on the nurses' personalities and flexibility in interpreting the Plunket regime. The picture drawn includes nurses who walked for miles in new suburbs to visit new mothers and babies, who dipped into their own pockets to help hard-up families, who took babies home to give stressed mothers a break, who helped with older children's correspondence lessons during Plunket visits, and who braved dog bites and vandalism in visits to low socio-economic areas. As others have also pointed out, the interface between mothers and nurses involved negotiation and accommodation, as well as an element of resistance to Plunket's teachings.

A Voice for Mothers moves between matters of high policy and the day-to-day experience of Plunket mothers and nurses. It touches base with a whole range of changing social concerns affecting the family, and reminds us of the changing foundation to 'scientific' dictates on human well-being. It contains wonderful photographic images of the Society's work, informatively and intelligently captioned. It provides a sympathetic view of Plunket's activities, without becoming an apologist for it. For this former Plunket baby, at least, it confirms that my own academic critique from the 1970s needs to be balanced by personal memories of visits to a buxom and benign Plunket nurse with my baby brother, of how supported my mother felt after such visits, and 'Plunkie's' relaxed assurance that it was fine for me to run free outside in bare feet as often as I wanted.

MARGARET TENNANT
Massey University – Palmerston North

Communities of Women: Historical Perspectives. Edited by Barbara Brookes and Dorothy Page. University of Otago Press, Dunedin, 2002, 229 pp. NZ price: $39.95. ISBN 1-8772-7631-6.

THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS is based on papers presented at the 'Communities of Women' conference held at the University of Otago in July 2000 to celebrate the hugely important career of Dorothy Page. The result is a diverse and innovative collection, with contributors drawn from the fields of history, art history, theology, sociology and law. The subject matter roams from medieval Europe to colonial Connecticut and across to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australasia. It is fitting that a collection that seeks to celebrate the career of a scholar who herself traversed widely over space and time, be so eclectic. This is a collection that makes an important contribution to the field of New Zealand women's history and will be a useful volume for varied audiences.

The editors asked contributors to 'retreat from a preoccupation with individualism to interrogate the meanings of community and its potential for investigating how women sought to create past worlds'. It is an explicit drawing back from the current preference within the fields of feminist and women's scholarship to use gender and difference as their categories of analysis. Perhaps the most pressing question that contributors had to grapple with was the meaning of 'community' itself. Throughout the collection, there is no fixed definition of 'that difficult word'.

In the opening chapter, Anna Davin explores the notion of community in the life of her mother Winnie Gonley. Davin analyses community in the life of her mother in terms of 'holding something in common' and 'a sense of common identity and characteristics'. Following Winnie's life from turn-of-the-century Southland to war-time Bristol, Davin explores how life-cycle and migration impacted on her mother's senses of sharing and belonging. She concludes that 'people are endlessly diverse and that community can take many forms'. The role of community in everyday life is also explored in Kate Hunter's account of gossip and romance in rural Australia around the turn of the twentieth century. In this chapter, Hunter both considers community as a physical location and as an 'imagined community' of women who connected through the pages of the developing rural press in the second decade of the twentieth century.

Dorothy Page's study of the first 50 women medical students from Otago Medical School further explores Davin's notion that communities transcend time and space. Just as Winnie Gonley maintained deep bonds with friends made in the 1930s, the women in Page's study similarly maintained close links after graduation. Page argues that these academic women formed a genuine community. Bonded by gender and training, the community served as a 'defence against the chill attitude of male staff and students'. It also provided positive support, academic mentoring and enduring friendship. Likewise, Barbara Harrison, in her study of British women factory inspectors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sees women being bonded into a community of support. Like Page's medical students, these women moved into an overwhelmingly male domain in the civil service and found themselves united by a 'common identity and sense of purpose at work'. This sense of community was further strengthened by a larger social commitment to labour and feminist causes.

Not surprisingly religious communities feature prominently in this collection. Judith Collard analyses Abbess Herrard of Hohenbourg's illustrated manuscript, 'Garden's of Delight', and suggests its importance in the creation of images of medieval nuns. Jennifer Carpenter examines the thirteenth-century communities in which Ida of Nevelles lived. She argues for the possibilities and opportunities for women within a religious order. Moving forward to nineteenth-century Australasia, Ann Gilroy examines the Josephite community sent from Australia to Temuka in 1883. Gilroy demonstrates the importance of the community of the order for those serving on the periphery and highlights the degree of autonomy possible for the women's community within the male church hierarchy.

Through a study of the Auckland Ladies' Benevolent Society, Margaret Tennant investigates the gendered nature of welfare and the culture of charity in a colonial setting. In this stimulating chapter, Tennant examines a New Zealand 'community of women' who were part of a philanthropic network that extended back to the imperial centre, Britain.

Whilst many scholars have viewed community as having a positive function, Melanie Nolan reminds us that in recent scholarship working-class and left-wing communities, once thought to be particularly coherent, are being reconsidered in terms of divisions and conflicts over gender. In a study of Wellington's Labour women 1919–1949, Nolan explores the fragility of community and concludes with the need to fracture the idea of community and not to conflate class and gender.

Providing 'race' as yet another axis along which to consider community are the chapters by Kathy Hermes and Alexandra Maravel and Marilyn Lake. Hermes and Maravel, in a fascinating study, use colonial probate records from Connecticut to examine a group of Native American women in the context of colonization. They argue that men and women reacted to first encounters with Europeans and later colonization in ways that 'reflect gender differences as well as unique tribal experiences with particular colonists'. Their study reveals a community of women at once assimilating and resisting colonization. The community, they argue, was not one based on place, but rather a common purpose. The volume fittingly concludes with Marilyn Lake's thought-provoking chapter on political communities. Through a study of the fight for Australian Aboriginal Citizenship rights in the 1950s and 1960s, Lake considers the 'repression of difference' required in imagined communities. She points to the challenge of promoting self-determination while simultaneously recognizing that the self constituted in racial, sexual and cultural differences still remains for those seeking to build political communities.

MEGAN WOODS

Christchurch

Mary Potter's Little Company of Mary: The New Zealand Experience, 1914–2002. By Ann Trotter. Bridget Williams Books for the Little Company of Mary, Wellington, 2003. 228 pp. NZ price: $39.95. ISBN 1-877242-31-4.

THE LITTLE COMPANY OF MARY is a Catholic order of religious sisters, affectionately known as the Blue Nuns, dedicated to the care of the sick and the dying. Founded in England by Mary Potter in 1877, the order spread to a number of countries before her death in 1913. Its members are trained nurses who established hospitals in Christchurch (1914), Wellington (1929), Hawera (1956), and Invercargill (1968) as well as a mission and medical clinic in Tonga (1975). The Christchurch and Wellington hospitals were initially called Lewisham, after the Sydney Lewisham Hospital (named after its suburb) from whence the New Zealand sisters had originally come, but in 1953 the New Zealand establishments became known as Calvary Hospitals.

After arriving in New Zealand at a time of growing sectarian tension, the sisters have, throughout their subsequent history, earned the respect and admiration of the communities in which they worked. This was demonstrated particularly in public financial support; for example, a broad ecumenical base was a notable feature of the fund-raising campaign for the Invercargill hospital in the early 1960s. While they attracted government subsidies to maintain their hospitals, the sisters must have saved the state huge sums of money by complementing the public health system.

Ann Trotter's book is a tribute to the Little Company of Mary and the self-sacrificing dedication of the sisters to the health of New Zealanders. As its title suggests, it is also intended to make better-known the founder whose name is linked to two remaining establishments in Christchurch and Wellington. Thus, there is a brief chapter on Mary Potter and her context and vision. Her spirituality was deeply influenced by St Louis Grignon (or Grignion) de Montfort, (1673–1716, canonized in 1947), author of the *Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, and, despite the discouragement of her