

is based on a close reading of primary sources from archives in Britain, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. Hensley's lucid and engaging appraisal of how New Zealand grappled with the realities of a world at war, and then helped to shape the post-war world, deserves to be widely read.

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Looking for Answers: A Life of Elsie Locke. By Maureen Birchfield. Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 2009. 500pp. NZ price: \$69.95. ISBN 978-1-877257-80-3.

I FIRST MET ELSIE LOCKE when I was ten years old. I went to many schools but luck would have me at Villa Maria in Christchurch when 'Mrs Locke' visited. Sister Miriam did not tell us that she was an ex-Communist Party member when she introduced her. Locke did not mention it either; she was invited because she was a local author of children's fiction. Of course Locke's visit was part of a 'unit': we walked over the Bridle Pass on the Port Hills; we visited the Rhodes' homestead; we went to the Canterbury Museum and walked along the cobbled colonial street; and the school trip was to the West Coast in Mary Phipps'/Small's fictional footsteps in the narrative of Locke's award-winning book *The Runaway Settlers*,¹ which Sister Miriam read to us aloud. But it was Locke's visit that made an impact on me and hers was certainly the first New Zealand history book I remember. I found myself researching in Locke's cottage 25 years later, reading her personal archives of activism in the working women's movement during the Depression with the privilege of chatting to the subject as I worked through her material. She invited me to join her for tea, and her husband Jack joined us. I told them about when Locke and I had first met and we talked about education. There were other meetings and other conversations over the years. Maureen Birchfield's conflict of interest is much greater than mine. Her mother, Connie, and Locke were friends from 1933 when they first met, both were Communist Party members who broke off membership over 1956, both were correspondents and both were the subjects of biographies by Birchfield. The webs of connection get thicker still. But do not discount Birchfield's book or my review because of the familiar New Zealand phenomenon of close connection. For I can give you a number of unsentimental reasons why this is a fine biography.

Above all this biography involved Birchfield in a great deal of hard historical research which she has written up well. Sometimes, because of the richness of sources and the waves of interpretations, it is easier to write a biography of a famous person than it is of someone lesser known whose activism was local. Moreover, Locke was modest and private — especially about some aspects of her life. She wrote about her years before joining the Communist Party in *Student at the Gates* (1981) and she began, albeit never finished, a sequel before she died. Although Locke wrote almost 40 books, numerous articles, *School Journal* stories, and over 100 radio commentaries as well as being a published poet, there was surprisingly little about her in all this material. The surviving correspondence is patchy. The newspaper and ephemera research was massive. Birchfield conducted just under 50 formal oral interviews. Moreover, she did not get permission to use the declassified information released by the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS) until the last moment and, by then, little was added.

Sheer diligence meant that, in the end, there was enough material, certainly there was more than enough visual material in this beautifully presented account. More problematic was the complexity of Locke's life; it was an awkward-shaped life to write up. It is completely appropriate, symbolically and physically, that this is an awkward-shaped book. It is a heavy non-standard tome which is not easy to hold; just as Locke's life is difficult to grasp with her involvements in social justice, women's rights, birth control, nuclear disarmament and

the environment, starting from when these were nascent movements in New Zealand. Of course it is the duty of a biographer to become familiar with all aspects of a subject's life, which Birchfield skilfully does. But Locke's complexity stems from her having invested her political energies significantly in the local realm of political activism. I am not referring to gender or domestic issues here, although they are related. Locke believed in local and national autonomy and grassroots democracy rather than democratic centralism.

As a social historian I would have liked Locke to have been contextualized even more. There were other aspects of the biography one could be critical of: for instance, Jack is killed off prematurely in terms of the narrative (p.402) and the final chapters are in the nature of tribute rather than analysis (pp.495–505). But all that pales into insignificance for me because of the usefulness of this account and its potential. I do not mean to slight this wonderful biography by describing it as useful. Social historians sometimes despair of biography: what is the usefulness of the single case for history? Which brings me finally to the issue of New Zealand women intellectuals in the mid-twentieth century; Birchfield uses a review Jock Phillips wrote about Locke to very good effect to introduce this theme.² Above all, Birchfield delves into Locke's ideas. Locke herself described the two years she spent flat on her back with spinal TB as the period in which she read and thought seriously and systematically but this was, I think, false modesty. Locke read and thought seriously throughout her life. Birchfield's description of Locke's thought processes transforms the narrative into an account of intellectual development rare in biographies of New Zealand women, especially of those involved in politics. In this regard, Birchfield has succeeded above all in chapters 10 and 11 when she describes why Locke broke with the Communist Party, why her husband Jack did not, and Locke's thinking as she worked through this. An intellectual is intelligent with a 'highly developed ability to reason and understand, especially in combination with wide knowledge and abstract thinking'. We have a small number of biographies of New Zealand women intellectuals like Beatrice Tinsley,³ who was a friend of Locke's son, Don. But Locke was a New Zealand writer engaged in politics. Thanks to Birchfield, we now have an account of such a woman's ideas.

Birchfield's biography suggests a collective biography of New Zealand women intellectuals. For wherever you place Locke in the social order, she was never, as Margot Roth fumed, 'just a housewife' (p.347). Locke, like Roth, was a university-educated woman. In 1932 there were 4149 students 'usually in attendance' at four university colleges and 30% of them were women.⁴ The point is that New Zealand had a high proportion of women with degrees who were gifted and who did not leave the country, at a time when a well-known group of men took flight as Rhodes scholars.⁵ From Locke on, most of these women did not become teachers; a group entered New Zealand's public service and pushed for equal pay; another group married but also joined organizations and concerned themselves with New Zealand identity. This book abounds with the names of women intellectuals who contributed to New Zealand society, including Elsie Andrews, Mary Dobbie, Margaret Long and Rona Bailey. If the same spotlight that has been trained upon Locke's intellectualism was shone on them, too, we would have the start of a new history of New Zealand women that went beyond a contribution to the history of the 'women's movement'. Birchfield's biography of Locke provides us with a rare and excellent example of a biography of a twentieth-century female New Zealand intellectual.

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NOTES

- 1 Elsie Locke, *The Runaway Settlers: An Historical Novel for Children*, London and Hamilton, 1965.
- 2 Jock Phillips, 'Whatever Happened to the Female Intellectuals?', *Comment*, No. 15, April, 1982, p.15.
- 3 Christine Cole Catley, *Bright Star: Beatrice Hill Tinsley, Astronomer*; Auckland, 2006.
- 4 *New Zealand Official Year Books, 1920–1933*.
- 5 James McNeish, *Dance of the Peacocks: New Zealanders in Exile in the Time of Hitler and Mao Tse-tung*, Auckland, 2003.

In the Footsteps of Ethel Benjamin: New Zealand's First Woman Lawyer. By Janet November. Victoria University Press for the Law Foundation of New Zealand, Wellington, 2009. 260pp. NZ price: \$50.00. ISBN 978-0-86473-607-9.

BEFORE SHE WAS TWENTY-TWO Ethel Benjamin had chalked up an impressive tally of 'firsts': first woman in Australasia to graduate in law; first graduand to speak at a graduation ceremony in New Zealand; first woman to speak officially at the University of Otago; first woman to practise law — and to make a respectable living out of it, too. Janet November recovers a considerable amount of the context in which Ethel developed, identifying the motivations and qualities that produced this diminutive, determined, intelligent, Jewish woman and shaped her into the excellent, successful citizen she became.

Ethel was born in Dunedin in 1875, the eldest of the ten children of a substantial 'money-broker'. From childhood she was fascinated by deeds and legal documents, and her father encouraged her in her ambition to become a lawyer. Teachers at Otago Girls' High School (OGHS) provided a curriculum that gave a firm foundation for university study; many of its students had graduated from university by the time Ethel came along. She was the first to study law, however, and the habits of study formed at home and the excellent language tuition of OGHS were invaluable because her legal tuition was fairly exiguous. Roman Law, in which she topped the examinations for New Zealand, was only one of the subjects she had to read without formal teaching, and in the teeth of resistance by the Otago District Law Society to her using its library except under special conditions. She had to read in the Judge's chamber room. Ethel thanked them for allowing her to 'consult your many valuable Books even though apart from the Library and the Profession'. Ethel's excellent marks removed any argument that women should not be permitted to practise because of inferior brains, and the Female Law Practitioners Act was passed in 1896, the year before she graduated.

Legal practice was not simple to set up for Ethel. She was not asked, and maybe never intended, to join a firm or become a clerk to acquire experience. Offices were rented near to Dunedin's best hotel and Ethel advertised her services and tended her growing practice herself. From the beginning she combined business and agency work with law. Clients were hoteliers negotiating the increasingly complicated licensing laws, creditors chasing debtors, wives chasing delinquent husbands, workers chasing unpaid wages; the common currency of legal practice in a barely settled society. November makes effective use of a treasure trove of Ethel's business letters to show her navigating this sea of troubles with aplomb. Dorothy Page in her foreword to the book rightly calls these letters 'a special delight'. Their freshness and directness brings to life the environment of settler Otago, for Ethel's clientele extended well beyond Dunedin. I suspect the letters owe more to the fine teaching of Ethel's teachers at OGHS than to anything she learned at the university. They are clear, direct and eminently sensible. Short of fleeing the province, the recipients would have been wise to take her advice.