

'Above the City': A History of Otago Boys' High School 1863–2013. By Rory Sweetman. Otago Boys' High School Foundation, Dunedin, 2013. 440pp plus 32pp colour inserts. NZ price: \$75.00. ISBN: 978473277720.

Commissioned histories can sometimes present challenges to professional historians when the sponsoring institution's desire for nostalgic hagiography clashes with the evidence and the historian's judgements. *'Above the City'* shows the importance of reading commissioned works' prefaces or introductions closely. Rory Sweetman uses his introduction to thank the people and institutions that helped him, explain archival limitations (his comment on the 'studied discourtesy and unprofessional nature' of the Toitū Otago Settlers Museum's response to his requests to consult early Otago Boys' High material deposited there should raise a few eyebrows) and signal that not everyone enjoyed their time 'above the city' (one old boy characterized it in the 1980s as 'a dinosaur-ridden, homophobic, racist, monocultured, right-wing cesspit of abuse'); Appendix Six spells that out in greater detail.

But wait, there is more. The same introduction explains that although the book is a commissioned history, 'I have been given the freedom to make my own assessments without fear or favour.' That should be read with a Lake Ellesmere of salt. On 25 July 2013 the *Otago Daily Times* reported that 'a controversial official history of Otago Boys' High School has been given detention'. The paper said that delays caused by the school's concerns about two dead rectors had caused it to miss the official celebrations and that according to Rector Clive Rennie, 'a couple of chapters had some things that were changed'. The alterations were probably minor and in any case the allegedly offensive matters seem pretty tame, one man sparking a staff mutiny, the other having a romantic liaison with a staff member. Less publicly obvious is another difficulty mentioned in the introduction, where Sweetman thanks the last two rectors for covering their terms, Michael McMillan 1986–2000, and Rennie 2000–2013, a fair chunk of history. 'These are not part of my history proper', Sweetman carefully cautions, before going on to spell out that McMillan's contribution was "'leaving unsaid" the unpleasantness that marked the last years of his rectorship', while Rennie 'has written frankly on the challenges he inherited and how he dealt with them'. The author of the next school history cannot say that he or she has not been warned.

The first parts of the book may offer a few surprises. We are so used to reading that Dunedin had the country's first university and its first girls' high school that it comes as a surprise to see how slow the town was in founding educational institutions of any worth. The community took 15 years to establish Otago Boys' High School (OBHS) and even then it acted with great parsimony. Even after making allowances for the setback caused by the death by drowning of the school's first master shortly after his arrival, the city and province had to wait for the Otago Boys' and Girls' High Schools Act of 1877 to free its institutions from petty political interference and sniping between some Dunedin Presbyterians and certain Anglican-tinged rectors they suspected of trying to build an English-style public school.

Like most such institutions, OBHS went through periods of expansion and retrenchment. The passing of the 1877 legislation was followed by an impressive building programme in the 1880s, when the first of architect Robert Lawson's grey-

and-white buildings took shape on an elevated site that gradually shed embarrassing neighbours such as the mental asylum and developed attractive grounds and playing fields on its steep slopes. Wars and depressions brought their own challenges, as did concerns over the structural integrity of the buildings themselves. At one stage the education authorities wanted to pull down the distinctive tower block and associated Victorian structures. They were strengthened and restored late last century.

Sweetman tells the school's history through the careers of its leaders, giving each rector a chapter to himself. While this provides a version of the chronological narrative usually preferred by lay readers of books of this type, it creates a slightly dated 'great man' feel to the book, gives some short-term or forgettable principals too high a profile, a little like writing a history of New Zealand Prime Minister by Prime Minister, and obscures more important turning points such as legislative changes or national policies such as 'Tomorrow's Schools'.

That said, Sweetman writes well and within the demands of an institutional history offers a good balance between people, policies and the many activities that make up the life of schools such as OBHS. There are no long lists of names of duxes or First XV captains, and relatively few nods to distinguished old boys such as Russell Coutts. As might be expected in such an elite school, there is a long history of sporting endeavour. The cadet movement held sway for a long time, with OBHS losing around 400 of the 3000 old boys and teachers it sent away to the world wars. Team sports are still important, but more recent chapters show interest in activities such as camping and tramping at the school's Matukituki River lodge, as well as drama and music. The roll is now considerably more multicultural – or at least by Dunedin standards. Several short appendices present old boys' memoirs and a brief pen portrait of a much-loved tuck shop and its operator.

'*Above the City*' is well presented in an attractive hardback format and on thick, high-grade paper. Sweetman has chosen the photographs well, sparing us most of those monotonous team photographs of young sportsmen facing the camera, arms grimly folded. On the other hand, the first 16-page section of amateurish caricatures from the school's *Morgazine* 60 years ago is a waste of half the precious colour space. Surely those pages would have been better given over to the school's architecture, collections and magnificent setting?

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'*I think I am becoming a New Zealander*': *Letters of J.C. Beaglehole*. Edited by Tim Beaglehole. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2013, 504pp. NZ price: \$80.00. ISBN: 9780864739025.

Collections of letters are a fascinating conceit when one stops to consider them. Firstly there is the writer's sense that their correspondence may be of interest and use to others