Book review

CHANGING TIMES: NEW ZEALAND SINCE 1945

Jenny Carlyon and Diana Morrow

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Jenny Carlyon and Diana Morrow's *Changing Times* is a substantial book that seeks to elucidate key ideological and political shifts in New Zealand since World War Two. The key thesis of *Changing Times* is that New Zealand has changed rapidly since 1945, from a welfare state built on collectivism to ideologies of neo-liberal individuality. Nonetheless, this focus on change sometimes obscures discursive continuities. *Changing Times* reinscribes the dominant historiography that promotes a view of New Zealand's past as egalitarian at the expense of considering gender and racial inequality. While some chapters may be of interest to general readers and undergraduate students, it should give the critical feminist reader pause for thought.

The book is organised into twelve chapters thematically; New Zealand's post-war 'egalitarian values', Anglo-American influences and foreign policy, New Zealand culture, leisure, contested political values and divisions, feminism and gay rights, race relations, transformations, reform, the Treaty after 1984 and immigration. At times, content is repeated from previous chapters. Thus, it seems designed to be read as stand-alone chapters rather than a cohesive book. This structure creates some internal confusion. While the chapter on feminism does recognise the inequality that women faced in the late 1960s, gender inequality is not considered in earlier chapters. The structuring of the book into discrete chapters presents feminism and gender inequality as an isolated and fleeting moment in New Zealand's history.

Chapter one 'On an even keel' could have benefited from critical commentary on sexism and racism. The authors would have been well served to consider Melanie Nolan's (2007) important critique of the hegemonic historiography that depicts New Zealand as egalitarian. Nolan argues the 'egalitarian myth' obscured 'significant gender and racial divisions' (Nolan, 2007, p. 116). Carlyon and Morrow (2013) valorise New Zealand's egalitarianism while uncritically accepting the breadwinner wage, the figure of the 'happy housewife' and racial inequality (p.37). The breadwinner wage was instituted by the Arbitration Act of 1936 and held that a man should earn enough to support himself, a wife and children. The corollary of this is that women's work was normatively defined to be subsidiary. This is problematic because at this time sixty per cent of men were single while the majority of women were responsible for dependents (Nolan, 2000). Women's work was *a priori* defined as being far less valuable than men's, regardless of the difficulties of paid work that women were engaged in. To my mind, this legally inscribed female dependence on male breadwinners and the resulting feminisation of poverty it entailed deserves at least a passing mention. While at least some women in this time were happily devoted to the domestic realm, it seems overstated to present the majority

of women as one-dimensional servants to their families' needs. The authors express shock that the 'threat to the post-war suburban dream at this time came, surprisingly, from its key component, the happy housewife' (p.37). This quote illustrates the lack of consideration given to normative understandings of gender and ensuing inequalities within New Zealand's purportedly egalitarian society.

The depiction of feminist and gay rights activist demands for equality in chapter seven also sits oddly with the prior chapters that celebrate the egalitarian nature of New Zealand. While the chapter on second wave feminism and gay rights presents an interesting snap-shot of this period, the authors' depiction of feminism and gay history is at times confused. They ostensibly attribute great success to the feminist movement yet devote considerable attention to deficiencies and extremism in the movement. They highlight the actions of 'six feminist vigilantes' who kidnapped Mervyn Thompson as emblematic of why feminists were seen in a negative light (p.233). This focus on examples of extremism obscures the difficulties that the extremists' more moderate sisters also faced. It also ignores the radical social challenge that feminism presented to New Zealand society and the wider power relations that made feminist demands unpalatable. Instead, Carlyon and Morrow present negative ideas about feminism as a mere failure of public relations. Likewise, the authors do not engage with the rich history of gay New Zealand before the gay liberation movement that Chris Brickell (2008) has persuasively established.

It is also apparent that only certain ethnicities enjoyed the egalitarian ethos of post-war New Zealand. Immigration policy favoured immigration from groups considered to be most like the British. Carlyon and Morrow write that: 'the government believed that Southern Europeans and Jews would not assimilate easily' (p.30) and consequently the government adopted the anti-Semitic policy of restricting Jewish immigrants. The celebration of New Zealand's egalitarian values is made without criticism of monoculturalism and racism in New Zealand. Due to the style of the book, which uses passive sentences to describe historical events and trends, it is not always clear what view the authors are promoting. Nonetheless, purported neutrality can be seen as reinscribing dominant discourses. Accordingly, *Changing Times* could have benefited from more critical reflection of its racial depictions.

Māori issues are relegated to two chapters on the Māori Renaissance in the 1970s and post-1984 race relations. Taking a more holistic approach that engaged with Māori issues throughout would have allowed a more nuanced view of the claims that New Zealand was egalitarian. Notably, the authors distinguish between New Zealanders and Māori writing that: 'New Zealanders' pride in their country's harmonious race relations remained unruffled' until racial activism in the 1970s' (p.248). The suggestion that New Zealanders were unaware of racial inequality, despite recognition of Māori grievances, suggests that the authors do not understand Māori to be New Zealanders. Nonetheless, the chapter on race relations is an engaging read and includes more critical commentary than other chapters.

Changing Times does include some interesting elements. Chapter four on leisure and popular culture until the 1970s is a particular highlight of the book. It is filled with fascinating examples of New Zealand's moral panic over the new discursive construction of the 'teenager' and delightful pop culture figures such as 'Curries Cowboys' and 'Pillion Pussies.' The beautifully reproduced photographs will also have wide appeal.

Carlyon and Morrow should be congratulated for undertaking such a mamoth task and incorporating some genuinely interesting content. While extensive attention is given to descriptive detail in minutiae, a strong overall analysis of the implications of key historical trends is missing. Unfortunately, the book offers nothing new for those with a passing understanding of New Zealand's history. This book missed an important opportunity to provide an analysis of

New Zealand's history that engages with important critiques of the dominant historiography. Due to the lack of consideration given to gender and race, Carlyon and Morrow's history of New Zealand since 1945 reinscribes a Pākehā and male dominated view of history.

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References

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