

Bronwyn Dalley, Jock Phillips, eds. *Going Public: The Changing Face of New Zealand History*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001. 226 pp. NZ\$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86940-226-6.



Reviewed by Jim McAloon (Senior Lecturer in History, Lincoln University, Canterbury)

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“Public history” is one of those phrases which has crept into general usage with little attention being paid to its problematic nature. The term itself is susceptible to numerous definitions, laid out very competently by Dalley in the first chapter, but the common denominator is “historical work undertaken according to the research priorities, agendas or funding capacities of another party rather than being self-directed by the historian” (p. 9). Much of the funding in New Zealand is by state agencies and local government; most of the chapters either consider various works commissioned by the central state or discuss public engagement with non-academic forms of history and “heritage.” Slightly on its own, but very useful because practice-based, is Susan Butterworth’s commonsense reflection on the process of writing contract history.

Michael Belgrave’s discussion of historians and the Waitangi Tribunal stands alongside W. H. Oliver’s influential essay on the Tribunal’s retrospective utopia (even if Belgrave does make an unfortunate reference to archival sources being “poured” over by a commission of inquiry). Belgrave shows that the involvement of historians was not inevitable; he then usefully comments on the disjunction between historiographical nuance and the legal desire for certainty, reflecting on the Ngai Tahu case. I do not disagree that the claimants were unprepared for

the depth of historical research required. No one was so prepared in August 1987; one might also ask how Belgrave’s Ph.D. in medical history equipped him to direct the Tribunal’s research effort. Not that this is to comment adversely on Belgrave’s discharge of those responsibilities; we were all implicated in a mad scramble and whatever qualms one might have about the casebook approach that the Tribunal has now adopted, it is easy to see why this was preferred. Giselle Byrnes more briefly echoes Belgrave’s concern with context and the ill-fit between historians and lawyers.

A number of chapters deal with public history beyond the book. Jock Phillips makes extravagant claims about books as sequential, linear forms exemplifying “a controlling patriarchal mode where one individual expounds with unchallenged authority” (p. 157). Despite this fashionable postmodern populism, Phillips is then forced to concede virtually every major criticism of “new media”: superficiality, escapist nostalgia, and an unwillingness to present historical information with any depth at all. The interview with a museum curator was also rather superficial and unreflective, but from Gavin McLean there is a very good discussion of the institutional frameworks in terms of heritage, and the great undervaluing and under-utilisation of historical skills at that level. This chapter is complete with a plethora of examples demonstrating

the extremely partial nature of what is regarded as “heritage” (my own pet example is the complete lack of acknowledgment that a rather grubby commercial building in central Christchurch was built as Trades Hall and as such is as much a cradle of the New Zealand Labour Party as is the Blackball coal mine). Anne Else pursues similar themes in a very useful discussion of various forms of popular engagement with history, particularly noting the way in which the past is used for political ends in the right wing’s declinist rhetoric.

Despite some strong contributions, I retain an abiding scepticism about the utility of the term “public history.” Its very breadth—commissioned history, heritage, museum exhibitions, archival management, and even the design of stamps—risks telling us nothing. Most of these fields are honorable professions in their own right and conflating these with history is, in my view, unhelpful.

Despite Dalley’s disavowals of defining in the negative, it is clear the term “public history” emerged in that way, meaning not-university history. The sole distinguishing definition, in the end, is that public historians work to the funder’s agenda rather than selecting their own research topic. Not only is public history defined by a negative, it is based on a false dichotomy, given

the major pressures on university historians to seek contestable research funding (and one could also note that academic appointment panels have hardly emphasised a free choice of research topic either). The other dichotomies implicit in the term are also false. Historical publication aimed at an audience other than academic? At least some academic writers aim at multiple audiences (and this does not imply dumbing-down). History written with public money? That includes all university history, and should exclude works commissioned by the private sector. These comments should not be construed as an attack on those who describe themselves as public historians, nor upon their work. If, as some contributors acknowledge, writing to a funder’s agenda risks the loss of curiosity-driven research and suggests a lack of reflection, this is far from true of the best such work. David Grant’s commissioned history of the New Zealand Stock Exchange, for instance, is unquestionably one of the finest works in New Zealand economic history. And, as Vincent O’Malley notes, to dismiss Waitangi Tribunal history for alleged narrowness ignores the fact it is only through such work that a lot of the detail is to be found. In the end the label worn by the historian is irrelevant to the quality of the work, and it is the quality that should count.

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