



CANTERBURY HISTORY FOUNDATION

Newsletter
December 2019

Christmas Greetings

The President and the Executive Committee take this opportunity to extend to you their best wishes for Christmas and the New Year. Have a safe and enjoyable holiday season.

Dr David Monger's term as Head of History expires in December. He will be succeeded by Dr Heather Wolfram who as head will hold a place on the Executive *ex officio*.

At the first meeting of the Executive after the AGM, Professor John Cookson was re-elected Chair and Professor Geoff Rice Secretary. We have yet to find a Treasurer. Perhaps our members will be able to help.

Latest Grants

Colin Amodeo, one of our most productive local historians, has been awarded a grant to publish a biography of John Watson, an influential early Canterbury figure as the first resident magistrate at Akaroa. Little has been written about Watson, and Akaroa also deserves the treatment it gets as a small outpost in the new colony of New Zealand. Caxton Press is the publisher.

Lisa Rolston, a Ph.D. student at Canterbury, is the recipient of a grant from the Friends and Graduates Fund which the CHF manages for the History Department. Lisa proposes to travel to England in July to attend the International Medieval Congress at Leeds and also meet up with her Durham co-supervisor.

National Memorial to Victims of the 1918 Flu

Geoff Rice, our ever-busy Secretary, has been lobbying the government for several years to erect a national memorial to the 9,000 New Zealanders who died in the 1918 influenza pandemic. This project was delayed last year, and again this year by the Christchurch mosque shootings.

His efforts were at last crowned with success on 6 November when the PM, Jacinda Ardern, invited him to help unveil two large metal plaques at Pukehau, the national war memorial in Wellington.

The memorial is located in the garden of the QEII Education Centre, a brick building dating from 1914 that was used during the pandemic as a crèche for children whose parents were ill or had died. Also present were three Cabinet ministers and the Director-General of the Ministry of Health.

J.M. Sherrard Award

This biennial award was inaugurated in 1972 and named after Jock Sherrard whose book, *Kaikoura: A History of the District* (1966) was considered to have set an example of scholarly standards in research and writing for local or regional history. The award is administered by the Canterbury Historical Association. The present judging is the 22nd and covers works published in 2016-17.

Two books were recognised for major awards – Jane Robertson, *Head of the Harbour: A History of Governor's Bay, Ohinetahi, Allandale and Teddington* (Philip King, 2016) and Jonathan West, *The Face of Nature: An Environmental History of the Otago Peninsula* (Otago University Press, 2017).

Jane Robertson's book is a comprehensive treatment of its subject and is beautifully produced. The Foundation is proud to have made a grant to cover some of the costs, though the bulk of the funding came from the community itself.

The judges comment: "Unlike many district histories, which seem at times little more than lists of names, this book gives enough stories and detail about individual lives to allow them to 'come alive' in the reader's mind, and the numerous photos enable us to see what they looked like."

Environmental history is all the better for addressing the local, particularly in a country like New Zealand where physical conditions are so varied. Jonathan West's book on Otago Peninsula differs from Robertson's in being shaped more as an exposition.

Three phases of the human impact on the Peninsula up to about 1900 are identified – the Maori presence, the shortish sojourn of sealers and whalers followed by families of farmer settlers. Maori are not seen as deliberate conservationists but 'optimal foragers', eating their way down the food chain from moa to seals and finally to fern roots. Their diet was transformed by the use of potatoes from about 1810.

European sealers and whalers brought new diseases and new technology. Measles and influenza killed many Otago Maori in the 1820s and 1830s. Muskets then added a deadly element to the mix. Farming had profound ecological effects. Axe and fire cleared the land for cultivation, Cats killed off the native kiore, while farmers were troubled by plagues of caterpillars, sandflies and mosquitoes. By 1897 the peninsula was 'one big dairy farm', though these days we know the Peninsula as a sheep farming area.

The judges also highly commended Jane McDonald, *How Is the River? A Takaka Valley History* and David Welch, *Port to Plains: Over and Under the Port Hills: the Story of the Lyttelton Railway Tunnel*.

Digitisation of Paper Archives

The digital revolution is affecting archives no less than other aspects of human existence. Our National Library each year takes copies of every website ending in .nz. Papers Past is the best known example of a paper archive converted into a digital format. It is not difficult to prophesy that in the not too distant future the practice of consulting the printed volumes of newspapers and periodicals will lapse altogether.

Papers Past, its coverage growing year by year, represents an accelerating trend in archive-keeping. In some circles, the digital archive is regarded as a totally acceptable alternative to the paper archive. Briefly put, the case is that digitisation offers vastly more economical storage, access to the material within the range of any computer, and a word

search function that enormously extends the scope of research in a time-efficient way. Paper conservation can also be a most expensive business.

We can no longer take for granted that our paper records will be regarded as a sacrosanct, or even worthwhile, part of our heritage. Culling may be already occurring in a place near you, reminiscent of the depredations that occurred in 1989 when local government was restructured and many councils disappeared.

Professional archivists, while accepting the merits of digitisation, favour the retention of paper archives for several reasons. The most obvious is the ongoing rapid evolution of computer technology. The floppy disks of yesteryear can only be read now if serviceable hard drives of the period survive. CDs will soon be similarly obsolete. Files, formats, websites, systems quickly fall out of fashion. The problem itself may not be insurmountable but the sheer volume of material threatens to make it so. The National Library added over 400 million text documents to its digital archive from the web in 2018. Fire and flood pose the greatest dangers to paper archives. But we delude ourselves if we think the digital archive is absolutely secure.

What is worth copying and preserving? Arguably the most valuable skill of the archivist is the ability to assess what classes of records and individual documents have potential future value. But we know that properly trained archivists are thin on the ground. In too many instances IT managers, acting under budgetary constraints in view of the massiveness of the task, are the ones likely to call the shots. In 1989 minute books were often all that local councils thought worth saving.

A final consideration is that documents are more than the words and images they convey. They are physical artefacts that can tell us much about what their possessors thought important to preserve, how they did business and made decisions, the advantages and limitations of the technology they possessed. Drafts and scribbled comments on scraps of paper, for example, have a value of their own.

Visit to Tuahiwi Marae

This bus trip is now scheduled for Sunday 29 March 2020. Further details in the New Year.