12. Biographies of Post-1900 New Zealand Prime Ministers¹

Doug Munro

Biography has long had a mixed reputation, hailed by some as the essence of history and by others as an unsatisfactory prism through which to view the past. Despite persistent criticism, the output of political biography remains unabated. In Pacific Islands historiography, a flourishing genre of political auto/biography can be divided into three broad categories: academic biographies; conventional autobiographies; and autobiographies of a different sort, involving Islander author and academic facilitator.² The state of political biography in New Zealand, also healthy, is more varied.³ At the top of the food chain are the prime ministers, many of whom are the subject of one or more book-length biographies (see Table 5). But a monograph is not the only way to do political biography. Prominent in the study of New Zealand prime ministers are edited collections; almost all such volumes originated as conferences involving politicians, public servants, academics, and often family members (see Table 6). There are also a handful of books, usually written for a broad audience, that provide accounts on the lives of various prime ministers,⁴ as well as a smattering of journal articles.

1 For discussions relating to this chapter I am grateful to Rod Alley and David Grant, and especially to Michael Bassett and Barry Gustafson. I am likewise grateful to Christine O'Brien of Auckland University Press who readily responded to my emails. Although I live in Wellington, I have an adjunct position with the University of Queensland, which has greatly assisted my research and writing.

2 J. Corbett, "'Two Worlds'?: Interpreting Political Leadership Narratives in the 20th-century Pacific', *Journal of Pacific History*, 47: 1 (2012), 6–91; R.M. Keesing, 'Writing Kwaio Life Histories: Issues of Authorship and Politics', *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 2: 1 (1992), 39–47; C. Moore, 'Noel Fatnowna and His Book: The Making of Fragments of a Lost Heritage', *Journal of Pacific Studies*, 18 (1994–5), 137–50; C. Moore, 'Pacific Islands Autobiography: Personal History and Diplomacy in the Solomon Islands', *Journal of Historical Biography*, 10 (2011), 1–33, available online at www.ufv.ca/jhb/Volume_10/Volume_10_Moore.pdf.

3 For comparable works to the present chapter, see G. Bolton, 'The Art of Australian Political Biography', in T. Arklay, J. Nethercote and J. Wanna (eds), *Australian Political Lives: Chronicling Political Careers* (Canberra, 2006), 1–12; L. Riall, 'The Shallow End of History?: The Substance and Future of Political Biography', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 40:3 (2010), 375–97; R.A.W. Rhodes, 'Theory, Method and British Political Life History', *Political Studies Review*, 10:2 (2012), 161–76; D. MacKenzie, 'Where Character Meets Circumstance: Political Biography in Modern Canada', *Adaciensis*, 42:1 (2013), 182–94.

4 For example, N. McMillan, *Top of the Greasy Pole: New Zealand's Prime Ministers in Recent Times* (Dunedin 1993); K. Eunson, *Mirrors on the Hill: Reflections on New Zealand's Political Leaders* (North Palmerston 2001); I.F. Grant, *Public Lives: New Zealand's Premiers and Prime Ministers, 1856–2003* (Wellington 2003); R. Wolfe, *Battlers, Bluffers and Bully-Boys* (Auckland 2005).

Political biography is multifaceted but the present chapter is narrower in focus. Pragmatically, the constraints on space require a manageable topic so the discussion is confined to book-length biographies of New Zealand prime ministers. The temporal span has also been attenuated. There is certainly an element of approximation in commencing at 1900, especially since the then incumbent Prime Minister, Richard John Seddon (1892–1906), had been in office for seven years and would remain so for another six years. But the choice of date is not altogether arbitrary. Quite simply, a gradual evolution of representative institutions since British annexation in 1840 had solidified by 1900 into the structures and conventions that have largely persisted to this day. A Westminster system of parliamentary democracy, including votes of women, was firmly in place. Of particular importance, provinces were abolished in 1876 and the unstable parliamentary factions of the 1870s and 80s had crystallised into formal political parties that were willing and able to exercise effective party discipline over their MPs. National and international conditions were prone to change but the institutional contexts within which prime ministers operated were entrenched by the turn of the previous century. Subsequent developments, such as the reorganisation of the public service in 1912, with competitive entry and promotion by merit, confirmed the prevailing dispensation.

As might be expected, the earlier biographies of Prime Ministers were products of time and place. They were not works of scholarship, as the term is understood. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the four colleges of the University of New Zealand were small and threadbare. More history was written outside the academy than from within. The history departments comprised two or three members and the teaching centred on Britain and Europe, and resolutely avoided New Zealand history. There was no research culture, although some academics wrote books. When such works dealt with New Zealand, the focus was on political and constitutional history or else nineteenth-century New Zealand history.⁵ There was certainly no thought of writing the biography of a prime minister.

5 For example, J. Hight and H.D. Bamford, *The Constitutional History and Laws of New Zealand* (Christchurch 1914); J.R. Elder (ed.), *The Letters and Journals of Samuel Marsden, 1765–1838* (Dunedin 1932). For the purpose of this exercise, I have consulted the *Calendars* of the four constituent Colleges of UNZ for the period.

Table 5: New Zealand prime ministers (since 1900) and their biographies

Name	Term in office	Party	Biographies
Richard Seddon†	1893 – 1906	Liberal	James Drummond, <i>The Life and Work of Richard John Seddon, Premier of New Zealand, 1893–1906: with a History of the Liberal Party in New Zealand</i> (Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1906), 392. R.M. Burdon, <i>King Dick: a Biography of Richard John Seddon</i> (Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1955), x, 338. Jean Nichol, <i>The Totara Tree: a Life of Richard John Seddon</i> (Nelson: the author, 2006), 109.
William Hall-Jones	1906	Liberal	F.G. Hall-Jones, <i>Sir William Hall-Jones: the Last of the Old Liberals</i> (Invercargill: Hall-Jones family, 1969), 152.
Joseph Ward	1906 – 1912, 1928 – 1930	Liberal Reform	R.A. Loughnan, <i>The Remarkable Life Story of Sir Joseph Ward: 40 Years a Liberal</i> (Wellington: New Century Press, 1929), 234. Michael Bassett, <i>Sir Joseph Ward: a Political Biography</i> (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1993), xi, 330.
Thomas Mackenzie	1912	Liberal	Nil
William Ferguson Massey†	1912 – 1925	Reform	H.J. Constable, <i>From Ploughboy to Premier: a New Life of the Right Hon. William Ferguson Massey, PC</i> (London: John Marlow Savage & Co, 1925), 79. G.H. Scholefield, <i>The Right Honourable William Fergusson Massey, MP, PC, Prime Minister of New Zealand, 1912–1925: a Personal Biography</i> (Wellington: Harry H Tombs, 1925), 25. D. Christine Massey, <i>The Life of the Rt. Hon. WF Massey, PC, LLD: Prime Minister of New Zealand, 1912–1925</i> (Auckland: the author, 1996), 70. (Reissued 1999, 78.) Bruce Farland, <i>Farmer Bill: William Ferguson Massey and the Reform Party</i> (Wellington: the author, 2008), 603.
Francis Bell (stopgap)	1925	Reform	W. Downie Stewart, <i>The Right Honourable Sir Francis HD Bell: PC, GCMG, KC: his Life and Times</i> (Wellington: Butterworth, 1937), xviii, 322.
Joseph Gordon Coates	1925–1928	Reform	Michael Bassett, <i>Coates of Kaipara</i> (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1995), 325pp. Bruce Farland, <i>Coates' Tale: War Hero, Politician, Statesman, Joseph Gordon Coates, Prime Minister of New Zealand, 1925–1928</i> (Wellington: the author, 1995), vii, 200.
George Forbes	1930–1935	United	Nil

Name	Term in office	Party	Biographies
Micahel Joseph Savage†	1935–1940	Labour	Barry Gustafson, <i>From the Cradle to the Grave: a Biography of Michael Joseph Savage</i> (Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1986), 369. (Republished in Auckland by Penguin, 1988).
Peter Fraser	1940–1949	Labour	James Thorn, <i>Peter Fraser: New Zealand's Wartime Prime Minister</i> (London: Oldhams Press, 1952), 288. Michael Bassett with Michael King, <i>Tomorrow Comes The Song: a Life of Peter Fraser</i> (Auckland: Penguin, 2000), 445.
Sidney Holland	1949–1957	National	Nil
Keith Holyoake	1957, 1960–72	National	Ross Doughty, <i>The Holyoake Years</i> (Feilding: self published, 1977), 274. Barry Gustafson, <i>Kiwi Keith: a Biography of Keith Holyoake</i> (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2007), 429.
Walter Nash	1957–1960	Labour	Keith Sinclair, <i>Walter Nash</i> (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1974/ New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), vii, 439. Craig Mackenzie, <i>Walter Nash: Pioneer and Prophet</i> (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1975), 176.
Jack Marshall	1972	National	Nil
Norman Kirk†	1972 – 1974	Labour	John Dunmore, <i>Norman Kirk: a Portrait</i> (Palmerston North: New Zealand Books, 1972), 116. Jim Eagles & Colin James, <i>The Making of a New Zealand Prime Minister</i> (Wellington: Cheshire, 1973), 231. David Grant, <i>The Mighty Totara: the life and times of Norman Kirk</i> (Auckland, 2014).
Hugh Watt (stopgap)	1974	Labour	Nil
Bill Rowling	1974	Labour	John Henderson, <i>Rowling: the Man and the Myth</i> (Auckland: Australia and New Zealand Books Co/ Wellington: Fraser Books, 1981), 210.
Robert Muldoon	1975 – 1984	National	Spiro Zavos, <i>The Real Muldoon</i> (Wellington: Fourth Estate Books, 1978), 234. Barry Gustafson, <i>His Way: a Biography of Robert Muldoon</i> (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2000), x, 545.
David Lange	1984 – 1989	Labour	Vernon Wright, <i>David Lange, Prime Minister: a Profile</i> (Wellington: Port Nicholson Press, 1984), 146. Michael Bassett, <i>Working with David: Inside the Lange Cabinet</i> (Auckland: Hodder Moa, 2008), 616.

Name	Term in office	Party	Biographies
Geoffrey Palmer	1989 – 1990	Labour	Raymond Richards, <i>Palmer: the Parliamentary Years</i> (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2010), 472.
Mike Moore	1990	Labour	Nil
Jim Bolger	1990 – 1997	National	Nil
Jenny Shipley	1997 – 1999	National	Nil
Helen Clark	1999 – 2008	Labour	Brian Edwards, <i>Helen: Portrait of a Prime Minister</i> (Auckland: Exisle, 2001), 352. Denis Welch, <i>Helen Clark: a Political Life</i> (Auckland: Penguin, 2009), 240.
John Key	2008 –	National	Nil

† died in office

Source: Author's compilation.

Where academics feared to tread, others were less timorous and the vacant spaces were occupied by journalists, personal friends, political associates and party retainers. The first such effort constitutes what would today be called 'instant history'⁶ – a substantial biography of Richard John Seddon, New Zealand's longest serving prime minister by James Drummond, published the year of Seddon's death in 1906.⁷ Drummond was a parliamentary reporter who had observed Seddon from the time he was elected in 1879.

Work on the book commenced two years earlier and Seddon had agreed to cooperate. Pressed by his publisher for the completed manuscript, Drummond hoped to accompany Seddon on a holiday voyage to Australia in order to elicit further information, but Seddon asked Drummond to defer until he got back to New Zealand. It was an opportunity lost, because Seddon died on the return voyage. Nonetheless, Drummond in short order produced a book approaching 400 pages of text.

⁶ D. Butler, 'Instant History', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 2: 2 (1968).

⁷ J. Drummond, *The Life and Work of Richard John Seddon, Premier of New Zealand, 1893–1906: with a History of the Liberal Party in New Zealand* (Christchurch 1906).

Table 6: Edited collections on New Zealand prime ministers

Clark, M. (ed.) 1997, <i>Sir Keith Holyoake: Towards a Political Biography</i> , Dunmore Press, Palmerston North.
—— (ed.) 1998, <i>Peter Fraser: Master Politician</i> , Dunmore Press, Palmerston North.
—— (ed.) 2001, <i>Three Labour Leaders: Nordmeyer, Kirk, Rowling</i> , Dunmore Press, Palmerston North.
—— (ed.) 2003, <i>Holyoake's Lieutenants</i> , Dunmore Press, Palmerston North.
—— (ed.) 2004, <i>Muldoon Revisited</i> , Dunmore Press, Palmerston North.
—— (ed.) 2005, <i>For the Record: Lange and the Fourth Labour Government</i> , Dunmore Publishing, Wellington.
—— (ed.) 2008, <i>The Bolger Years, 1900–1997</i> , Dunmore Publishing, Wellington.
Watson, J. & Paterson, L. (eds) 2011, <i>A Great New Zealand Prime Minister?: Reappraising William Ferguson Massey</i> , University of Otago Press, Dunedin.

The seven volumes edited by Margaret Clark came out of the annual Parliamentary Conferences jointly organised by the Stout Research Centre (Victoria University of Wellington), the Department of Politics and International Relations of Victoria University (VUW), and the Association of Former Parliamentarians. The volume on WF Massey resulted from the Massey@Massey Conference, Massey University, Palmerston North, 2006.

Source: Author's compilation.

Drummond's biography of Seddon is deferential and compendious. In keeping with contemporary conventions, the subject is referred to as 'Mr. Seddon' throughout. Apart from an account of Seddon's childhood and early influences, the book is overwhelmingly a political biography, accounting for Seddon's rise through the ranks, his stock of ideas and, when premier, a running account of his government's legislative achievements and his part in the process. The Liberal Party was a reforming government and Drummond provides detailed chapters on the bursts of social and labour legislation, and the provisions for female suffrage and land tenure that transformed the landscape. It is largely descriptive political biography but there are thematic chapters on Seddon 'The Humanist' (meaning someone 'eager to do something for humanity's sake') and another on how Seddon was represented 'In Cartoon and Story'. Drummond does not pass over the crises and scandals that beset Seddon and his government but he does put the best possible complexion on them. In short, the book is hagiographic, as instanced by the description of Seddon's decision to continue the thrust of his predecessor's policies:

His success completely changed him. From the day when he was sworn in as Premier he became another man. His mind had broadened when he became a Minister; it expanded further when he became Premier. He said he was no longer merely a party fighter, but the representative of the country as a whole. He recognised that he was the servant of the people, a phrase which he used frequently. At the same time he let it be known that he would not be dominated by any factions. As a private

member, he had denied the right of his leader to gag him in the House. In the same way as Prime Minister he denied the right of any collection of individuals to control his actions or dictate his policy.⁸

For all that, Drummond's *Seddon* is a serious and diligent work containing a good deal of useful and accurate information. It set a reasonable enough benchmark which the next two biographies did not live up to. They followed closely on the death, in 1925, of William Ferguson Massey, the leader of the Reform Party on the conservative side of politics (1912–25). Henry Constable's *From Ploughboy to Premier* has a 'from log cabin to White House' quality about it. The author had already written an equally slight 'romantic history' of New Zealand, and a more hagiographic account than his 10,000–12,000-word biography of Massey could scarcely be imagined:

Of all the countries lined up for the great struggle which in 1914 and the succeeding years convulsed the world and shook it to its foundations, only one – New Zealand – has not seen a change of government. In a great measure this was due to the fact that the Dominion had been exceedingly fortunate in its choice of a leader, the Right Hon. William Ferguson Massey, P.C., Prime Minister since 1912.

Mr. Massey's services were not confined to New Zealand, however. He was looked up to, honoured and respected throughout the British world. He was deservedly regarded as one of the most trustworthy and dependable statesmen of the Empire.⁹

The second short biography of Massey was published the year of his death. It was an oddly unbalanced short book – a mere 25 pages of closely printed text where much is said about Massey's family background, early parliamentary career and his rise to leader of the opposition of the conservative Reform Party. Less than three pages is devoted to his prime ministership on the less-than-plausible grounds that 'The history of the Massey administration [which commenced in 1912] is too recent to require recapitulation'. To Scholefield, Massey personified courage, loyalty and steadfastness: 'Solidity, staunchness, straightforwardness and honesty have recommended Mr. Massey to the British people wherever he has met them, and through him the Dominion has been represented by the characteristics which most appeal to British people'.¹⁰

8 Ibid., 176.

9 H.J. Constable, *From Ploughboy to Premier: a New Life of the Right Hon. William Ferguson Massey, PC*, (London 1925), 9, 12. See also Constable, *The Romantic History of New Zealand*, with an Introduction by W. F. Massey (London 1924).

10 G.H. Scholefield, *The Right Honourable William Fergusson Massey, MP, PC, Prime Minister of New Zealand, 1912–1925: a Personal Biography* (Wellington 1925), 23.

Scholefield was a journalist, archivist and librarian as well as a trained historian. He had already published the first general history of the Pacific Islands, an undistinguished treatise that originated as a doctoral thesis at the University of London.¹¹ He would go on, among other things, to publish a book of essays on 12 prime ministers, entitled *Notable New Zealand Statesmen*.¹² But despite an academic training, Scholefield was unable to achieve critical distance from his subjects, and neither did he attempt to. As one assessment has it, Scholefield 'was over-protective of his "notables" so as not to give offence to the living or the dead ... [T]he critical analysis, assessment and reassessment practised by a later generation of professional historians were not his tools of trade'.¹³

These same features are evident in the next three biographies of prime ministers. The first was by R.A. Loughnan, a journalist and former editor of the *New Zealand Times* (which was effectively a mouthpiece of the Liberal Party). His biography of Sir Joseph Ward, in 1929, contains not a whiff of the financial scandal that engulfed Ward during the mid 1890s.¹⁴ William Downie Stewart's 1937 biography of Sir Francis Dillon Bell (who was stopgap Prime Minister in 1925) treats the subject as a secular saint.¹⁵ It too is full of verbatim transcriptions of speeches, letters and parliamentary debates, often replete with vacuous pieties. Trade unionist and Labour Party functionary James Thorn largely avoided these faults but his 1952 informative biography of Peter Fraser suffered a double disability.¹⁶ First, many of the people who could have talked about Fraser's earlier years had died. Second, the biography was written too soon after Fraser's death to be other than devoutly respectful. Although Fraser (1940–49) does not appear in the one-dimensional vein that Massey and Ward did at the hands of their respective biographers, Thorn's study nonetheless tends toward veneration.

11 G.H. Scholefield, *The Pacific: its Past and Future, and the Policy of the Great Powers from the Eighteenth Century* (London 1919). See also D. Shineberg, 'The Early Years of Pacific History', *Journal of Pacific Studies*, 20 (1996), 3–4.

12 G. Scholefield, *Notable New Zealand Statesmen: Twelve Prime Ministers* (Christchurch 1946).

13 F. Porter, 'Scholefield, Guy Hardy, 1877–1963', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, available online at www.TeAra.govt.nz/mi/biographies/4s12/scholefield-guy-hardy. All the Prime Ministers and many other individuals named in this chapter can be looked up online in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*. Scholefield destroyed what was left of his reputation in the early 1960s when it came to light that his edited publication of the correspondence between two prominent New Zealand families was marred by numerous errors of transcription and, worse, that he had defaced the originals with annotations in ink and deletions in crayon. W.H. Oliver, 'The Richmond-Atkinson Papers', *Landfall*, 17: 2 (1963), 177–87.

14 R.A. Loughnan, *The Remarkable Life Story of Sir Joseph Ward: 40 Years a Liberal* (Wellington 1929).

15 W. Downie Stewart, *The Right Honourable Sir Francis H.D. Bell: P.C., G.C.M.G., K.C.: his Life and Times* (Wellington 1937).

16 J. Thorn, *Peter Fraser: New Zealand's Wartime Prime Minister* (London 1952).

Until the early 1950s, the biographies of New Zealand prime ministers were characteristically works of piety. These tactful and decorous accounts were typified in the original *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* (1940), which was mostly written by Scholefield. As another historian said that ‘our Dr Scholefield is not the man to soil a tomb with ambiguous flowers; he lays the pure lily; no weed of criticism enters into his wealth; our Great it seems are all Good, or if not good then Misunderstood’.¹⁷ In this they mirrored the national and regional histories of the times which, with little exception, were cheerleading narratives of progress and virtue.¹⁸ They were also based on inadequate research. It was only in 1955, with the publication of Randall Burdon’s biography of Seddon, that the first such biography with a semblance of academic rigour appeared.¹⁹ Burdon was a lawyer by training but had taken up full-time historical research. He had already, *inter alia*, written a biography of Sir Julius Vogel, a nineteenth-century prime minister, and would go on to publish a history of New Zealand between the world wars, his *magnum opus*.²⁰ Where Burdon departed from his predecessors – with the ironic exception of James Drummond – was that he attempted to come to grips with the political processes and to discuss the mechanics of policy-making as well as the ensuing legislation, and to recognise the importance of leadership rather than simply taking it for granted.

As mentioned, the high-minded panegyrics that had passed for political biography prior to Burdon’s *King Dick* were, in part, a reflection of the times: tactful and decorous biographies were the order of the day. They are also a reflection of the state of the historical profession in New Zealand where relatively few historians were university trained – although this was no guarantee of quality, as Scholefield demonstrates. To compound existing problems, the sources for political biography were difficult of access thanks to the dishevelled, dispersed and under-resourced state of the National Archives.²¹ As Burdon complained, researchers ‘were not encouraged’ to consult the records kept at Government House.²² Change was already afoot, however. An expansion of university enrolments from the late 1940s resulted from ex-servicemen receiving rehabilitation scholarships to embark on, or complete, tertiary study. This, in turn, resulted in the growth of the history departments, and the greater numbers of qualified teaching staff led to the increasing professionalisation of New Zealand

17 Quoted in T. Beaglehole, *A Life of J.C. Beaglehole: the New Zealand Scholar* (Wellington 2006), 276.

18 An exception is J.C. Beaglehole, *New Zealand: a Short History* (London 1936).

19 R.M. Burdon, *King Dick: a Biography of Richard John Seddon* (Christchurch 1955). See the reviews by P.J. O’Farrell, *Landfall*, 9:1 (1956), 48–52; Michael Turnbull, *Political Science*, 8:1 (1956), 85–89.

20 R.M. Burdon, *Sir Julius Vogel* (Christchurch 1948); R.M. Burdon, *The New Dominion: a Social and Political History of New Zealand, 1918–39*, (Wellington 1965).

21 See J.C. Beaglehole, ‘Why Archives?’, *New Zealand Journal of Public Administration*, 15: 1 (1952), 9–16; A.G. Bagnall, ‘The Historical Perspective’, *Archifacts*, 7: 8 (1978), 5–11.

22 Burdon, *King Dick*, 322.

historiography.²³ In an associated development, hard-nosed professionals were urging more rigorous approaches to the study of history involving detailed archival research, a critical evaluation of sources and the proper preservation and management of archives.²⁴ This conjunction of influences saw a burgeoning of scholarly historical monographs and decent general histories from the early 1950s.²⁵ A related, although delayed, development was the establishment of political science departments in the universities. For many years, the only such department was at Victoria University College but after 1964 the three other universities took political science on board. The country's only specialist journal (*Political Science*) was established in 1947 and until the 1970s published many articles by historians on themes relating to political and labour history.²⁶

The scene was thus set for scholarly political biography to emerge, as it did in the 1960s with biographies of William Pember Reeves (Minister of Labour in the Seddon government and Agent-General in London), Harry Holland (Labour Party leader in opposition in the 1920s and early 1930s), and John A. Lee (Labour Party maverick).²⁷ The emergence of scholarly works by academics did nothing to prevent others from writing political biography. Limiting the discussion to Prime Ministers, family members wrote slight biographies of William Hall-Jones and W.F. Massey, both privately published, that recalled the hagiographic 'men of achievement' type works of a bygone age.²⁸ In one case a neighbour wrote a touching homily of the Labour Prime Minister Walter Nash.²⁹ Enterprising journalists and freelance writers added their might with hurriedly written works, usually of reasonable quality in the circumstances, timed for the

23 The changing face of New Zealand historiography can be traced in C. Hilliard, *Island Shores: the Writing of New Zealand History, 1920–1940*, M.A. thesis (Auckland 1997); G. Young, *The War of Intellectual Independence: New Zealand Historians and Their History*, M.A. thesis (Auckland 1998).

24 For example, K. Sinclair, *The Maori Land League: an Examination into the Source of a Historical Myth*, (Auckland 1950), 3; J.C. Beaglehole, 'The New Zealand Scholar', in P. Munz (ed.), *The Feel of Truth* (Wellington 1969), 51.

25 For contemporary assessments of New Zealand historiography, see T.G. Wilson, 'The Writing of New Zealand History', *Landfall*, 8: 4 (1957), 213–33; K. Sinclair, 'New Zealand', in R.W. Winks (ed.), *The Historiography of the British Empire-Commonwealth: Trends, Interpretations, Resources* (Durham 1966), 174–96.

26 W.J. Gardner, 'The Rise of W. F. Massey, 1891–1912', *Political Science*, 13: 1 (1961), 3–30; W.J. Gardner, 'W. F. Massey in Power, 1912–1925', *Political Science*, 13: 2 (1961), 3–30; P.S. O'Connor, 'Some Political Preoccupations of Mr Massey, 1918–20', *Political Science*, 18: 2 (1966), 16–38; P.S. O'Connor, 'The Stout-Sedden Precedence Controversy', *Political Science*, 22: 2 (1970), 2–22.

27 K. Sinclair, *William Pember Reeves: New Zealand Fabian* (Oxford 1965); P.J. O'Farrell, *Harry Holland: Militant Socialist* (Canberra 1964); E. Olssen, *John A. Lee* (Dunedin 1977). The latter was originally presented as an MA thesis in 1965.

28 F.G. Hall-Jones, *Sir William Hall-Jones: the Last of the Old Liberals*, privately published (Invercargill 1969); D.C. Massey, *The Life of the Rt. Hon. W.F. Massey P.C., L.L.D.: Prime Minister of New Zealand, 1912–1925*, privately published (Auckland 1996).

29 C. Mackenzie, *Walter Nash: Pioneer and Prophet* (Palmerston North 1975). A neighbourly biography is not as surprising as it might sound in this particular case. As Nash's principal biographer has pointed out, '[he] had few, if any, intimates who were in politics, after he became a minister. (His closest friends were neighbours.)' Keith Sinclair, *Walter Nash* (Auckland 1976), 257–58.

aftermath of a general election.³⁰ One of them, however – a biography of Helen Clark (1999–2008) – takes verbal slapstick to new levels with passages such as: ‘Labour staggered away from the 1990 election like a groggy boxer who’s been too long on the ropes’.³¹ A little later we read:

Whatever the mission statement, Labour wasn’t so much a party for the first half of 1990 as a permanent political identity crisis; no matter how hard it tried to mow its front lawn and look respectable to the neighbours, there was the dreadful pong in the back yard from the decaying corpse of Rogernomics [the package by which the Fourth Labour Government restructured the economic, named after its chief architect Roger Douglas]. At the next annual conference, in September 1991, Moore [Mike Moore, former Prime Minister] tried to bury it once and for all by declaring ‘Rogernomics has had its day’ and ‘New Zealand must move on’; but it came across like Dracula saying he’d lost his taste for necks.³²

This particular work, by a journalist who had twice stood for Parliament, is based on interviews, newspaper sources and a smattering of secondary sources. It cannot be described as scholarly or having academic merit. But the boundaries between academic and non-academic work are blurred, as demonstrated by an earlier biography of Helen Clark, published in 1991, in Clark’s first term as Prime Minister.³³ The biographer, Brian Edwards, had made a career in television journalism but had a doctorate in German literature and was originally a lecturer at the University of Canterbury.³⁴ He had close links with the Labour Party and used his contacts to good effect in his interviews for the book. Although writing a sympathetic account for a popular audience and, despite consulting a limited range of written sources, the academic in Edwards unobtrusively emerges. The academic/non-academic dichotomy is also blurred by the works of Bruce Farland, a former secondary school teacher with a Master’s degree in history.³⁵ His substantial biography of W.F. Massey takes issue with the stereotypes of Massey as a mindless imperialist and bigoted Protestant but is relentlessly descriptive and concludes with full-throated diatribes against

30 J. Eagles and C. James, *The Making of a New Zealand Prime Minister* (Wellington 1973); V. Wright, *David Lange, Prime Minister: a Profile* (Wellington 1984).

31 D. Welch, *Helen Clark: a Political Life* (Auckland 2009), 125.

32 Ibid, 127.

33 B. Edwards, *Helen: Portrait of a Prime Minister* (Auckland 2001).

34 B. Edwards, *Public Eye* (Wellington 1971).

35 Published in 1995 as *Coates’ Tale: War Hero, Politician, Statesman, Joseph Gordon Coates, Prime Minister of New Zealand, 1925–1928*, the author, Wellington.

historians who have given Massey a bad press.³⁶ It is not that Farland is a hard-pressed journalist facing a deadline. Rather, he had time at his disposal and, despite a dearth of personal papers, nonetheless confined his research to newspapers, the *Parliamentary Debates*, and to a lesser extent parliamentary papers (the *Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives*).

The academic/non-academic dichotomy also breaks down in the cases of the shorter biographies of Norman Kirk (1972–74), Bill Rowling (1974–75) and Robert Muldoon (1975–84) that were written during their subjects' lifetimes. In the lead-up to the 1972 election, which returned the Labour Party to power after a 12-year wilderness, John Dunmore, an academic who was active in the Labour Party organisation, wrote a brief biography of Norman Kirk that could be unkindly, although not altogether inaccurately, described as an extended election brochure. The hagiographic tone is set by the opening statement: 'The first full-length [sic] biography of the man who, within eight years of entering Parliament, became Leader of the Opposition and the youngest leader of the Labour Party since its foundation in 1916'.³⁷ By contrast, in 1978, Spiro Zavos published *The Real Muldoon*, after Robert Muldoon returned the National Party to power in 1975. Although marred by numerous factual errors, it is a penetrating work by a venturesome journalist with postgraduate degrees to his name. No one was neutral about the abrasive and divisive Muldoon, and Zavos was hardly a supporter. Muldoon's appearance, together with his belligerent political style, earned him the nickname 'Piggy Muldoon', or sometimes just 'The Pig'. On one occasion, although severely provoked, he punched a demonstrator and then chased a group of them 'down the street allegedly calling out to them "one at a time and you're welcome"'.³⁸ Muldoon was into the third year of his reign when Zavos was writing his 'instant history'. Assisted by the research of fellow journalist Denis Wederell (who abandoned a biography of Muldoon), and not overlooking the less attractive side of his subject, Zavos countered the unrelenting (and often justified) criticisms of Muldoon's political opponents to provide what a later biographer described as 'astute overall assessment'.³⁹

36 B. Farland, *Farmer Bill: William Ferguson Massey and the Reform Party*, privately published (Wellington 2008). Compare the nuanced discussion by Eric Olssen, 'Towards a Reassessment of W.F. Massey: One of New Zealand's Greatest Prime Ministers (arguably)', in James Watson and Lachy Paterson (eds), *A Great New Zealand Prime Minister?: Reappraising William Ferguson Massey* (Dunedin, 2011), 15–30.

37 J. Dunmore, *Norman Kirk: a Portrait* (Palmerston North 1972), 1. See also Dunmore, *I Remember Tomorrow: an Autobiography* (Waikanae, 1998), 149. Dunmore was Professor of French at Massey University and the historian of French exploration in the Pacific Islands.

38 B. Gustafson, *His Way: a Biography of Robert Muldoon* (Auckland 2000), 148 and photo opposite, 182.

39 S. Zavos, *The Real Muldoon* (Wellington 1978); Gustafson, *His Way*, 153–55, 528.

Of a somewhat different order is John Henderson's short biography of Bill Rowling. Rowling had the misfortune of stepping into the prime ministerial shoes upon the untimely death of Norman Kirk in 1974.⁴⁰ No one could have replaced a man of Kirk's stature and the diminutive Rowling was the butt of unfavourable comparisons, in particular that he was a weak and ineffectual leader. Muldoon, at that point the Leader of the Opposition, was vocal in his denigrating of Rowling's political standing but it transpires that the individual who led the charge from behind the scenes was the former Prime Minister Keith Holyoake (by then a member of the Muldoon cabinet), who insisted that:

the Labour leader, although 'a nice little bloke', should be dismissed as 'not impressive' and as a 'schoolboy in a man's job'. He repeatedly urged his colleagues to 'laugh at Rowling. We've got to brand him as an inoffensive and ineffectual Prime Minister'. He demanded that ... National MPs remember that ... 'Rowling is a disaster'.⁴¹

The smears stuck. The immediate upshot was the formation of Citizens for Rowling, a campaign mounted in the lead-up to the 1975 election that sought both to bolster Rowling's public image and to attack Muldoon's leadership style.⁴² But to no avail: Labour was defeated at the election and Rowling had a prolonged and disheartening time as Leader of the Opposition until being ignominiously replaced by David Lange in 1983. Henderson was very loyal to Rowling, as he later was to Lange. His biography of the former is unabashedly affectionate and avowedly sets out to rehabilitate a fallen reputation. He does so not as a Labour Party functionary but '[a]s a political scientist with a particular interest in political leadership'. When dealing with political biography, in other words, it is better to simply assess the product than to be influenced by such labels as 'academic' and 'non-academic'.

The question of motivation explains why some prime ministers and not others receive the accolade of a biography. Clearly, an individual's perceived stature will have a bearing. It is also the case that very recent prime ministers are less likely to be the subject of a biography, although exceptions readily come to mind (Muldoon and Clark), and that the political left is more likely to attract biography than the political right. But it requires explanation why certain prime ministers have yet to find their biographer – why they are non-starters or have been consigned to a no-go zone. It could be argued that all the good ones have been snapped up and the example of George Forbes (1930–35) lends credence to this observation. Arguably the least distinguished of New Zealand's twentieth-century prime ministers, Forbes was described by one historian as the

⁴⁰ J. Henderson, *Rowling: the Man and the Myth* (Wellington 1981).

⁴¹ Gustafson, *His Way*, 360.

⁴² K.P. Clements, 'Citizens for Rowling Campaign: an Insider's View', *Political Science*, 28: 2 (1976), 81–96.

‘Canterbury farmer who had been successful in spending a lengthy period in Parliament without giving rise to the suspicion that he would one day lead it’,⁴³ and his government stands condemned for heartlessly mismanaging the social impact of the Great Depression. It stands to reason that no aspiring political biographer wants to touch him. Less explicable is why Sidney Holland (1947–57) has yet to receive a biography. His significance in remaking the conservative side of politics can scarcely be overestimated. It was his drive and ambition during the 1940s that turned the National Party into the force that enabled it to govern New Zealand for most of the second half of the twentieth century. But his repellent personality and his destructive decline at the tail end of his prime ministership have resulted in him becoming an especially despised individual whom no one seemingly wants to touch.⁴⁴ It has been ‘unkindly noted’ of National Prime Minister Jenny Shipley (1997–99) ‘that publishers have not exactly been clamouring for her memoirs, despite the fact that she still has a stash of official papers locked away in a container which, she mischievously hints, contain some interesting nuggets indeed’. Neither have biographers been queuing on her doorstep.⁴⁵

What motivates a biographer to choose one prime minister rather than another – or to write political biography at all – is less a matter of the stature of a particular prime minister and more a function of the chance event that someone is prepared to sink the time and effort into such a venture. There is a definite element of serendipity as to why some prime ministers are chosen and others are not. It can be quite a pragmatic, even an aberrant decision, as in the case of Raymond Richards embarking on Geoffrey Palmer’s biography. Richards was hired by his alma mater, the University of Waikato, as an Americanist, but was unable to get funding for research into American history. Very reluctantly he turned to New Zealand history and decided upon a biography of Palmer, whose ‘fingerprints’ were all over the fourth Labour Government.⁴⁶

43 Beaglehole, *New Zealand*, 89. See also M. Bassett, *Coates of Kaipara* (Auckland 1995), 174–75, 232.

44 The historian Bill Oliver fondly recalls that he first considered giving his obituary on Holland the title ‘Death of a Salesman’, but he ‘chickened out at the last moment’. W.H. Oliver, *Looking for the Phoenix: a Memoir* (Wellington 2001), 107; W.H. Oliver, ‘Sir Sydney [sic] Holland’, *Comment*, 9 (1961), 4–6. Holland’s decline is recounted in B. Gustafson, *Kiwi Keith: a Biography of Keith Holyoake* (Auckland 2007), 89–92. Holland prepared notes as an *aide-memoire* for an intended autobiography, but his declining health stalled the project. See R. Doughty, *The Holyoake Years* (Feilding 1977), 4–5. Had the memoirs been written they would have been the first autobiography by a New Zealand Prime Minister.

45 K. Scherer, ‘The Prime of Mrs Jenny Shipley’, *New Zealand Herald*, 4 February 2008.

46 D. Munro, ‘Writing the Biography of Geoffrey Palmer: Interview with Raymond Richards’, *History Now*, 8: 4 (2002), 2–4; R. Richards, *Palmer: the Parliamentary Years* (Christchurch 2010).

More commonly the decision to write a particular prime minister's biography is more purposeful, as in the cases of Barry Gustafson and Michael Bassett, the two most prolific biographers of New Zealand prime ministers.⁴⁷ Both were students at the University of Auckland in the late 1950s/early 60s, and both were politically active. Gustafson was a Labour Party activist before switching to the National Party; Bassett was a member of the Third Labour Government (1972–75). Re-elected to Parliament in 1978, and a Cabinet Minister in the fourth Labour Government (1984–90), he was a wholehearted supporter of the neo-liberal economic restructuring and he too subsequently shifted to the political right.

Neither Bassett nor Gustafson set out to be political biographers but early inklings were there, particularly with Bassett, who recalls taking an interest in the 1946 election at the age of eight. He was always interested in politics and the only history taught at university level in the 1950s was political history. He had suggested a biography of J.G. Ward (1906–12, 1928–30) for his M.A. thesis. Told that the Ward Papers had been destroyed, he settled to write about the 1951 waterfront dispute.⁴⁸ Becoming a Member of Parliament in 1972, Bassett was fascinated in the ways that political leaders 'controlled the scene, how they were successful and what caused problems'. This, in turn, aroused a fascination 'in how people got to the top, how they stayed there, and what they achieved'. The initial impetus to write political biography, however, was quite accidental. The 1981 cliffhanger election resulted in National being returned with a majority of one, thanks to support from the Social Credit Party. The Leader of the Opposition (Rowling), thinking that this was unprecedented, thus prompted Bassett to write a small book showing that political uncertainty of this kind was common enough in New Zealand political history.⁴⁹ This led Bassett back to Ward, his original proposal for an M.A. thesis topic. There may have been a dearth of personal papers but he now knew where official records were and he located material in the keeping of the Ward family. An added motivation for choosing Ward was, like Palmer, the prevalence of his 'fingerprints' – or as Bassett puts it:

He was [quite apart from his contribution to Liberal Government policies] the one constant factor in New Zealand's political life in the period 1890–1921, where his irrepressible ambition obliged every other

47 The following discussion is largely based on telephone interviews with Michael Bassett (25 February 2013) and Barry Gustafson (4 March 2013).

48 Published in 1972 as *Confrontation '51: the 1951 Waterfront Dispute*, Wellington. See also M. Bassett, 'In Search of Sir Joseph Ward', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 21: 1 (1987), 112–24.

49 M. Bassett, *Three Party Politics in New Zealand, 1911–31* (Auckland 1982).

major player to keep a wary eye on his movements Ward's continuing presence on stage [was] like a piece of sturdy antique furniture around which the rest of the cast were forced to shuffle.⁵⁰

Ward led on to a biography of Gordon Coates (1925–28). Bassett's interest in political leadership and his respect for strong leadership are apparent: 'My book is certainly no work of devotion. Coates had many personal strengths, but lacked that ruthless streak without which Prime Ministers seldom succeed'.⁵¹

Bassett did not confine his scholarly writing to biography but his next biographical assignment came as a result of his previous biographical work. Sir Alister McIntosh, the former head of the Prime Minister's Department, intended to write Peter Fraser's biography as a retirement project, but by then his health was not up to the task. He enlisted Michael King's assistance in the late 1970s but a few years later King suffered a lengthy illness and the project went into abeyance. Bassett was eventually asked to take over and the book was published in 2000.⁵² Most recently, Bassett has written about David Lange. Although not strictly speaking a biography – it is as much about the fourth Labour Government and contains considerable autobiographical material – but it may be regarded as a biography for the purposes of this exercise.⁵³

Gustafson's trajectory moved along broadly similar lines to Bassett's. When discussing a M.A. thesis topic, Gustafson suggested the first Labour Prime Minister Michael Savage (1935–40) as one possibility, but his advisers declined. Their attitude was that it was a non-topic on the grounds that Savage was simply the front man for Peter Fraser, who provided all the ideas, and Walter Nash, who did all the work. He settled instead for a thesis on the foundation of the Labour Party⁵⁴ and discovered that Savage was more significant than his advisers realised. After writing a booklet for secondary school use on Savage in 1968,⁵⁵ and once other projects were completed, Gustafson proceeded on a full-scale biography of Savage, published in 1986.⁵⁶ He did not intend to write another political biography but when he switched allegiances to the National Party

50 M. Bassett, *Sir Joseph Ward: a Political Biography* (Auckland 1993), vii–viii.

51 Bassett, *Coates of Kaipara*, 4. The prominent public servant W.B. Sutch, who was a member of Coates's 'brains trust' during the Depression years, embarked on a biography and had written six chapters by the time of his death in 1975. Sutch's research material and the chapters are in the Sutch Papers, 93-244-14, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

52 M. Bassett and M. King, *Tomorrow Comes The Song: a Life of Peter Fraser*, (Auckland 2000). The early start enabled King to interview Fraser's surviving contemporaries and family members. Most of these interviews would not have been possible by the time Bassett entered the scene. Moreover, the paucity of personal papers meant that the interviews were crucial to the eventual biography.

53 M. Bassett, *Working with David: Inside the Lange Cabinet* (Auckland 2008).

54 Published in 1980 as *Labour's Path to Political Independence: the Origins and Establishment of the New Zealand Labour Party*.

55 B. Gustafson, *Michael Joseph Savage* (Wellington 1968).

56 B. Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave: a Biography of Michael Joseph Savage* (Auckland 1986).

and wrote its silver jubilee history, the interest in people as historical subjects returned. For one thing, he had formed views on Holyoake and Muldoon that were different from public perceptions. For another, there were biographies of Labour leaders, the most recent being a biography of Walter Nash (1957–60),⁵⁷ but nothing at that point on the National prime ministers. He was therefore receptive to Muldoon's invitation to write his biography on a 'warts-and-all' basis with complete access to Muldoon's personal archive.⁵⁸ One thing led to another: Gustafson then had thrust upon him the mantle of de facto National Party biographer-in-residence, was urged by senior party members 'to get on to Holyoake', and an invitation from the family was forthcoming.

The foregoing discussion might give the impression that the academic biographies of prime ministers effortlessly rolled out in majestic sequence. The reality is different. Surprise was expressed in 1997 that there was no sign on the horizon of a 'full and authoritative biography' of Holyoake: 'the family are keen and co-operative and the archives extensive and accessible'.⁵⁹ First, someone had to be willing and able to undertake such a sizeable commitment, and Gustafson eventually took up the family's request that he embark on the project. In 1999 Michael Bassett said of Kirk, 'He is a complex figure worthy of a big study. If I was only fifty instead of sixty, I would be tempted to tackle him'.⁶⁰ Fifteen years later, justice was done with the appearance of David Grant's biography of Kirk, and David Welch is working on another one.⁶¹ Bassett also mentioned in 1999 that there were 50 years of New Zealand twentieth-century political life without a substantial biography of the prime minister of the day.⁶² The actual figure was closer to 65 years. By my count that figure has been reduced to 40 years, largely through the efforts of Gustafson and Bassett. New Zealand historical biography would be impoverished but for the chance happening of these two individuals committing themselves to multiple biographies.

But quantity is never sufficient in itself. What impresses about the academic biographies, first, is the sheer extent of the research – a far cry from the lazy days of the 1920s and 1930s. It is not altogether correct that real lives are lived going forwards, not knowing what will come next, while the process of biography works in reverse. If that were so, then there would be no need for research. To the contrary, while many things are known in advance, the lived life still has to be unravelled by the biographer and this requires close and detailed research. Gustafson going to Australia to research Savage's early life and Bassett diligently tracking down material on Ward are but two examples of the increasing

57 K. Sinclair, *Walter Nash* (Auckland 1976).

58 Gustafson, *His Way*, 1–3.

59 M. Clark (ed.), *Sir Keith Holyoake: Towards a Political Biography* (Palmerston North 1997), 10.

60 T. Burnard, 'Bassett Tackles the State: the Politician as Historian', *History Now*, 5: 1 (1999), 8.

61 David Grant, *The Mighty Totara: the life and times of Norman Kirk* (Auckland 2014).

62 Ibid.

intensity of such research. To the official government publications and the newspaper sources that satisfied a previous generation of biographers are now added personal papers, party records, the files of government departments and interviews. There is an enormous amount of material. Raymond Richards was given access to 235 linear metres of Geoffrey Palmer's papers.⁶³ In Gustafson's case, the interview material from previous biographies is often pressed into service for his current project. Improved technology has also meant that television and radio broadcasts are available in ways they were not before. Consequently, the biographies of New Zealand prime ministers are getting bigger, without yet attaining the stretch limousine proportions of the multi-volume biographies of Lyndon Johnson and some other United States presidents.⁶⁴

The expanding conception of the biographer's task also results in more satisfying books. The biographies are no longer devotional but they are almost always written by party faithful and true believers. An exception is Richards. Although generally sympathetic, he is by no means uncritical of Palmer, pointing out his leadership limitations and the ruthlessness with which Palmer rushed through his legislative program, which contradicted his principled earlier stance against the excesses of executive authority.⁶⁵ The academic biographers would probably agree with Gustafson that the objective is to present the life 'as honestly and accurately as one can'.⁶⁶ Truth, of course, is that elusive beacon on the hill, and in this case the journey is more important than the destination – namely, fairness to people, to situations and to the evidence. That is evident in Bassett's biography-of-sorts of David Lange, which must have been difficult to write considering their eventual falling out. But Bassett does capture the thrills and spills of 'working with David' – his enormous talent, the egregious flaws, and the negative influence, eventually, of Margaret Pope who became Lange's wife.⁶⁷ Lange's accident-proneness was also captured by the head of his office, Gerald Hensley:

As the months turned into years ... the suspicion grew that in some mysterious way David Lange contributed to the general uncertainty.

63 Richards, *Palmer*, 7.

64 The automobile imagery is taken from M. Kammen, 'Teach Us Our Recollections', *Reviews in American History*, 29: 2 (2001), 183–91.

65 Richards, *Palmer*, 382–401, (ch. 20: 'The Court of History').

66 Gustafson, *His Way*, 12. Few political biographers would innocently say: 'My philosophy of history is extremely simple: I am interested in finding out what happened, not in perpetuating theories, myths or party ideologies; I do not attempt to justify any preconceived personal theory; and whatever conclusions I might arrive at emerge from what I discovered during my researches. Historical truth is too important to be distorted by historians' stubbornly held personal or political opinions, and too much New Zealand historical writing, from William Pember Reeves to Keith Sinclair (and even beyond), has been devalued by them'. E. Bohan, *Burdon: a Man of our Time* (Christchurch 2004), 10–11. Burdon was a National Party cabinet minister in the 1990s.

67 Bassett, *Working with David*. Margaret Pope presents her side of the story in M. Pope, *At the Turning Point: My Political Life with David Lange* (Auckland 2011).

He was a sort of political poltergeist: a restless and perhaps unhappy spirit around whom strange things happened, the equivalent of pictures falling off walls and objects rising from the table.⁶⁸

Gustafson also said that ‘No biographer can be completely sure that he has captured the whole truth. Indeed I believe no one can’.⁶⁹ And he frankly admits that certain aspects of his biography of Muldoon would have been different had he known at the time what he discovered post-publication.⁷⁰ Although stressing how brutal and aggressive Muldoon could be, I do not believe that Gustafson quite managed to convey the menace of the man. On the other hand, I am not alone in feeling that *Kiwi Keith* ‘completely changed my view of the man and the contribution he made to New Zealand’s society, economy, and foreign policies during his 1960 to 1972 tenure as prime minister under a National Party government’.⁷¹ Holyoake was *far* more than the pompous ass of legend.

For all that, Gustafson does not shy away from depicting Holyoake’s ruthless streak. His manoeuvring in 1940, as Gustafson puts it, was ‘not entirely altruistic’. Holyoake had lost his marginal seat in the previous election and as a condition of standing for election once again he demanded a safe electorate, and, furthermore, that the party machine arrange for the funding for the purchase of a farm as his new place of abode. He was holding his party to ransom with the veiled threat that he had been offered the parliamentary leadership of the newly formed People’s Movement, whose mobilisation would have split the right-wing vote.⁷² Gustafson also deals with Holyoake’s role as a partner in a property at Kinloch in the central North Island. Gustafson recognises that Holyoake exerted improper influence in having a road built to the property at government expense, the effect of which was to enable profitable subdivision. More recently it has been demonstrated that the construction of the access road and the alienation of adjoining Maori land involved far more serious breaches of propriety than depicted by Gustafson.⁷³ Holyoake’s determination not to bow out of politics is also adversely commented on. He was reluctant to stand down as prime minister and only did so when it became apparently that the National Party was unlikely to win the 1972 election. In effect, his successor received a ‘hospital pass’, in the same way Holyoake had in 1957 when Holland’s delayed retirement gave him too little time before the upcoming election. Even then Holyoake refused

68 G. Hensley, *Final Approaches: a Memoir* (Auckland 2006), 293–94.

69 Gustafson, *His Way*, 12.

70 B. Gustafson, ‘A Postscript to *His Way*’, *Political Science*, 53: 1 (2001), 48–55.

71 See reviews by L. Bryder, *Journal of Historical Biography*, 5 (2009), 128–31; D. Munro, *Journal of Pacific History*, 43: 3 (2008), 404–05.

72 Gustafson, *Kiwi Keith*, 36–41. Gustafson also provides a corrective. An earlier biographer asserted that Holyoake was asked by the party to stand for a different seat but had no idea about the party arranging for the purchase of the farm. Doughty, *The Holyoake Years*, 82–83.

73 Gustafson, *Kiwi Keith*, 36–41, 82–85; P. Hamer, ‘Kiwi Keith at Kinloch: a Closer Look at Holyoake’s “proudest achievement”’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, 44:2 (2010), 157–73.

to retire from parliamentary life. Instead he became an uncomfortable presence in the shadow cabinet; and when he finally did retire from parliament he was controversially appointed, at his own request, as Governor-General. He hung around far too long.⁷⁴

People have strong views on who makes the best sort of political biographer and when the time is right for a particular biography to be attempted is a moot point. Michael Bassett is adamant that political experience is a prerequisite and points out, with respect to his biography of Ward, that 'My ... ministerial experience gave me insights that no backbencher can ever gain. *Ward* is a miles better book than the early drafts, due to my much greater appreciation by 1990 of the way the system works'.⁷⁵ There is also often a feeling that a certain (always unspecified) time should elapse before a biography is attempted. In the case of Muldoon, one reviewer of *His Way* felt that '[i]ts appearance [in 2000] is appropriate. The hate factor has died down. Moreover, Muldoon can be assessed in the broader context of what has followed him'.⁷⁶ Having contact with the subject and his or her family is certainly helpful to the biographer in providing information and insights but it can also create complications. Gustafson was berated post-publication by Dame Thea Muldoon for his comment that Muldoon had come from 'the wrong side of the tracks': this was described as 'an insult to the family'.⁷⁷ The help given by subject and family can certainly restrain and even compromise a biographer, but it can also work the other way. Richards had absolutely no obstruction from Palmer. Palmer expressed surprise when approached by Richards but made all his papers and asked for a warts-and-all biography. He did not ask to see chapter drafts and neither was he shown any. At the book launch in November 2010, two weeks after publication, Palmer still hadn't read the book, to the astonishment of those present that someone could be so remarkably unconcerned at what had been written about him. Biographers dream of such latitude and it speaks volumes for Geoffrey Palmer that he more or less said, 'Write your book as though I am not going to read it'.⁷⁸

Another point is that the recent academic biographies are narrative rather than analytical, or should I say that the analysis is embedded in the narrative. It is an attraction and an advantage that political biography is actually readable while at the same time becoming increasingly academic in research and footnoting. What this means is that the language of political science is eschewed and, for example, while models and theories of political leadership might inform the narrative,

74 Gustafson, *Kiwi Keith*, chs. 17–18.

75 Burnard, 'Bassett Tackles the State', 6.

76 K.R. Howe, review (of *His Way*, by Barry Gustafson), in *New Zealand Journal of History*, 35: 2 (2001), 244.

77 Gustafson, 'A Postscript to *His Way*', 54.

78 In his subsequent autobiography, Palmer acknowledged the extent of Richards' research, but barely mentions his biography again, explaining that he wished to tell his own story. G. Palmer, *Reform: a Memoir* (Wellington 2013), 12, fn 466.

the jargon is avoided. Such discussions are better suited to specialised journal articles or to monographs dedicated to questions of leadership.⁷⁹ This is perhaps as well, given the need for a broad audience if the publishers are to remain in business. The sales figures for the political biographies published by Auckland University Press give no grounds for complacency (see Table 7).

Table 7: Sales figures for political biographies published by Auckland University Press⁸⁰

Keith Sinclair	<i>Walter Nash</i> hardback edition: 7,950 (OP)
Keith Sinclair	<i>Walter Nash</i> paperback edition: 4,970 (OP)
Michael Bassett	<i>Sir Joseph Ward</i> : 968 (OP)
Michael Bassett	<i>Coates of the Kaipara</i> : 1,448 (almost OP)
Barry Gustafson	<i>His Way</i> hardback edition: 6,270 (some stock)
Barry Gustafson	<i>His Way</i> paperback edition: 3,285 (almost OP)
Barry Gustafson	<i>Kiwi Keith</i> : 2,793 (some stock)

Source: C. O'Brien (see footnote 79).

Noteworthy is the fact that sales of *Walter Nash* almost exceed those of the other biographies combined. *Walter Nash* won two major book awards but the sales were boosted by factors extraneous to quality. The author was a very prominent historian and public figure; and the subject divided public opinion and would have been very much alive in the memories of book buyers of the day. The book itself became famously controversial as the Security Intelligence Service tried to ban it as a security risk.⁸¹

Conclusion

Political biography has detractors and many of the criticisms are summed up thus:

Biographies are, very often, a most unsatisfactory form from an historical and political point of view. The reason for this is quite simple – very few politicians are particularly interesting *per se*, though many may

⁷⁹ For example, J. Henderson, 'Muldoon and Kirk: "active negative" Prime Ministers', *Political Science*, 30:2 (1978), 111–14; Henderson, 'Muldoon and Rowling: a Preliminary Analysis of Contrasting Leadership Styles', *Political Science*, 32:1 (1980), 26–46; J. Johansson (guest editor), *Political Science* (special issue on political leadership in New Zealand), 56:2 (2004); Johansson, *Two Titans: Muldoon, Lange and Leadership*. (Wellington, 2005).

⁸⁰ C. O'Brien, email to author, 12 February 2013.

⁸¹ K. Sinclair, *Halfway Round the Harbour* (Auckland 1993), 210–16; R. Lilburn, 'Security Intelligence Records in New Zealand: a Case Study', *Archifacts*, April–October (2003), 5–7.

be interesting *sui generis*. And few indeed were sufficiently important, or so powerful in their time, that they had a really decisive impact, single-handedly, on their environment.

Thus frequently biographers have to face the problem that their subject was decisively important on one issue, or one event, maybe two, but that otherwise he was only one of a number of actors in a political drama, the scenario for which was written by others and was largely beyond his control, and in which most of the action was directed by someone else. To put this another way, political biographers usually have to try to maintain an uneasy balance between what the biographical subject thought and did and what the rest of the world was doing at the same time – the context within which he was operating.⁸²

In sum, such criticisms equate with saying that political biography ought to transmute into political history per se. There is the obvious point that biography necessarily revolves around a person and, as Gustafson warns, a biography 'should not also be the history of a nation or of a government or of a political party', although it may contain elements of each.⁸³ The criticisms would be valid if monographic biography was the only way of approaching political history, but it is not. Rather, biography is just one path towards an understanding of political history, one which complements the other approaches but without any suggestion that it is capable of displacing them. Context has to be discussed but not to the point that it overwhelms the subject. The opportunities and constraints of the times and the environment in which prime ministers operated cannot be ignored, and the biographer needs to steer a course between these two competing claims. A successful biography will demonstrate that events are shaped by the interplay of impersonal forces and human action, as demonstrated in Tom Brooking's biography of the Liberal politician John McKenzie.⁸⁴ Emerging from the work on McKenzie is Brooking's recent biography of Richard John Seddon, but this might never have happened had David Hamer lived to complete a similar project – which in turn emerged out of Hamer's work on the Liberal Party.⁸⁵ Two more different approaches to political biography could scarcely be imagined. In keeping with his previous work, Hamer would likely have written a history of the times rather than a biography of the man: context would, in all likelihood, dominate the narrative. Brooking gave a foretaste of his contrasting approach to Seddon in a public lecture. He intends to portray 'a more complex

82 L. Watson, review of D. Aitkin, *The Colonel: a Political Biography of Sir Michael Bruxner*, in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 15: 3 (1969), 154.

83 Gustafson, *His Way*, 12.

84 See T. Brooking, *Lands for the People? The Highland Clearances and the Colonisation of New Zealand: a Biography of John McKenzie* (Dunedin 1996), 9–10.

85 D. Hamer, *The New Zealand Liberals: the Years in Power, 1891–1912* (Auckland 1988). See also D. Mackay, 'Obituary: David Hamer, 1938–1999', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 33:2 (1999), 243.

and multifaceted character than the often one-dimensional portraits within our historical literature which tend to caricature [Seddon] as an insensitive, anti-intellectual populist'. Brooking, in other words, will be offering a corrective – 'a post-revisionist account or a re-bunk' – to the 'presentist dismissal by enabling us to better understand why [Seddon] was so very popular with the majority of the New Zealand electorate and so despised by his opponents'.⁸⁶ Such an approach – where the personal is never far away from the political – combined with balancing the interplay of impersonal forces and human action is the dominant mode of political biography, as practiced in New Zealand. The journalistic quickies and the tracts of the party faithful will not go away. But the lengthy, detailed and heavily researched (and documented) political biography is the way of the future.

86 Tom Brooking, 'Tall Tales: Richard John Seddon and the building of "God's Own Country"', Michael King Memorial Lecture, University of Otago, 14 October 2009 – the podcast can be downloaded from www.otago.ac.nz/news/itunesu/podcasts/index.rss?podcast=OTAGO007012&type=video. Tom Brooking, *Richard Seddon: King of God's Own: the life and times of New Zealand's longest-serving prime minister* (Auckland 2014).

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