

Harry Maude would not have wanted his very private thoughts on the apprentice work of students, such as Caroline Ralston, publicized, but biographers sometimes do not share the sensibilities of their subjects.

Munro's selection includes one living historian — Lal. This seems incongruous. The dead cannot quarrel with their biographers; the dead cannot write references and recommendations for academic preference and position. The living have still potential for good or ill, for success or failure — the jury is still out on the significance and longevity of their contribution. It is not a little ironic that Davidson, whom Munro considers foundational to the establishment and development of Pacific history, merits a mere 32 pages, while Lal, who presumably has still time on this earth, takes up 53 pages. Any candidate for biography has more control of representation when he has provided exhaustive interviews for a biographer. Davidson, on the other hand, was too busy with events, such as challenging university hierarchies and the Australian government about academic freedom, to engage in prolonged retrospection before his death at age 57.

Overall, this book will appeal to those interested in Pacific history's origins and the intellectual environment of the humanities at leading universities in Australia and New Zealand of the mid to late twentieth century. Regarding its subjects, Jumonville was correct. To their families, friends and staunch colleagues, what will be remembered most is what sort of a human being the historian was, with less regard to what they wrote or failed to write. In a short generation or two this will fade with those who hold the memory. To posterity — to potential students of and from the Pacific Islands, 'parochial' or not, and other interested readers — what these five historians wrote will be far more important. Unless their works continue to be read, their 'large gesture against the sky' (p.296) will merely be a wave goodbye.

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A Sadly Troubled History: The Meanings of Suicide in the Modern Age. By John Weaver. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 2009. 447pp. NZ price: \$70.00. ISBN 978-0-7735-513-8.

THIS IS A BRILLIANT, INSTRUCTIVE AND ABSORBING BOOK. John Weaver brings 'authentic events from common lives' out of the archives and transports 'the tearful realities of the human condition into social history' (p.15). Read out of context, Weaver's claim perhaps seems grandiose, but this book achieves its ambitions in that it deals with simply terrible stories of loss, grief, madness, wilful self-destruction, and worse, by finding ways to explain these within a carefully constructed framework for understanding social and cultural histories of suicide in the 'modern' age. His aim is to provide a way into suicide studies — historically the province of sociologists and psychologists and 'suicidologists' — and to create a multi-faceted history of the phenomenon of suicide. Supported through a careful crafting of statistical data and qualitative analysis of 'cases', the end result of Weaver's work provides historians with both a solid history of the problem of suicide, and an excellent model of social and cultural history.

Far from being an obscure history topic, the history of suicide requires deep understanding and analysis, and is relevant through its sheer statistical reputation: estimated at around one million a year globally, suicide is the cause of more deaths than homicide, war and conflict. Weaver bases his study on cases from New Zealand and Queensland between the late nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century. He chose these sites both for their relevance within the modern Western history of suicide, and because the records in both places are comprehensive. His research draws upon nearly 7000 cases from coroners'

inquest files in the two jurisdictions, also making this history a contribution to debates about methods and approaches to legal and medical history. One of Weaver's potential problems, which he foregrounds, lies in balancing the use of this dataset with qualitative readings of fewer cases, although at one-tenth of the total, this is still a considerable number.

However, the organization of the text makes this possible. *A Sadly Troubled History* is shaped into three parts, with reflections on the epistemic bases of suicide in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries providing the context for the detailed analysis of rates of suicide and motives for committing suicidal acts in their social contexts. Significant differences emerged between male and female cohorts. The final part of the book examines intentions and decisions, and acts of suicide, and links the book's findings to communities of care through a discussion of the provision of psychiatric services and treatments.

Weaver's careful discussion of the intellectual contexts for suicide studies, which for some time was dominated by the work of the sociologist Emile Durkheim, shows that the foundation for understanding suicide has been flawed in its lack of consideration for both individuals and their emotions. Aggregated data produced about suicide was limited but influential. By the twentieth century, epistemologies of suicide perpetuated the disciplinary perspectives of the previous century to an extent. Two chapters explore the changes in these 'epistemic communities' and link bodies of sociological and psychological literature to other interpretations, among them biomedical notions of mental health. Historians arrived later to these discussions, Weaver argues, and their work took a range of positions derived from the social sciences. The act of 'reconstruction' in historical writing would allow new ways of deciphering evidence, such as theories about the effect of the life course transition on suicide, as he goes on to show in his numerical survey of the cases. The majority of the statistical information is presented in these chapters, and it provides a useful background to the qualitative analysis, while also suggesting that such data is far from perfect.

Gender differences emerge as a major organizing principle in understanding suicide. This book finds that men and women had different motives for committing suicide, but also that age introduces another variable to the discussion. The chapter about men, titled 'Work and Troubles', finds that male suicide was prompted by unemployment, alcoholism, medical complaints and, among younger men, romantic disappointment. Patterns changed according to decades, too; war looms large in Weaver's work. Female suicide centred on 'Sorrows and Burdens', as the chapter's title suggests. One of the critical findings here is that women were more often the victims of male abuse, neglect, violence and jealousy, and that this burden led in some instances to self-destruction. These two chapters set out a rich discussion about gender that I cannot reproduce here but that will be useful for readers interested in questions about gender and mental health, among other themes. Ethnicity is one category of analysis that receives rather less attention, but that perhaps characterizes New Zealand and Queensland in particular ways when compared to other Western countries.

As a comparative history of two former colonial sites, the book sets out another agenda: to incorporate discussions across place, thereby exploring national or site-specific histories of suicide on a broader canvas. New Zealand and Queensland provide a useful set of comparisons. They are both 'frontier' settler societies, with, for example, the common experiences of men and women in remote communities, and experiences of wartime and the global influenza pandemic and their social repercussions (about which Weaver makes several critical points). Weaver's points about these two societies and their historical contexts, which are woven throughout his analysis of cases, owe much to his interest in colonialism and land. A range of images used in the book appear especially poignant when illustrating a history of suicide: for instance, a poster from promotional literature for Queensland and New Zealand depicting a 'swagger' on the trail in New Zealand in 1910, and a photograph of the clientele of the bar of the Quilpie Hotel in Queensland around 1921.

This book also nods to the relative impossibility of some histories. The archive might indeed be detailed in the cases of New Zealand and Queensland coronial inquest files, but

suicide remains inaccessible and difficult to fully know or understand. Therefore, *A Sadly Troubled History* also raises questions about the nature of archival sources and knowledge and our modes of inquiry in utilizing these. Weaver ends his book with a reminder that historians might never really enter into the pain of their subjects, and he allows the last word to come from one New Zealand woman who acknowledged that her own anguish over her mental health was also baffling to medical science.

Weaver writes this book with curiosity and with compassion. He is driven by a real hunger to understand why people in some contexts find it necessary to take their own lives. Often, his research team, as he reports in the book, had to take a break from the relentlessly sad material and discuss it; as he says, 'this is not research for the faint of heart' (p.xvi). However, the reading audience for this history is lucky that Weaver has ventured into this difficult work, because this book is more than just a significant and stellar contribution to historical debates; in fact, it sets a very high bar for historians in social history fields everywhere.

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The Britannic Vision: Historians and the Making of the British Commonwealth of Nations, 1907–48. By W. David McIntyre. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2009. xvi + 317pp. UK price: £65.00. ISBN 978-0-230-22781-1.

IN PROFESSOR MCINTYRE'S LATEST BOOK on the Commonwealth, he focuses mainly on the period of what came to be called the 'British Commonwealth of Nations', a 'short-lived group' that 'flourished in the first half of the [twentieth] century'. It received such definition as it ever received in the Balfour Declaration of 1926 and the Statute of Westminster of 1931. This is what he describes as the Britannic vision. It 'embraced a world where independence and unity could be combined' [p.ix].

The structure of the book is novel, and though it involves some repetition, helpful. Part One, entitled Historiography, offers studies of some 17 'historians', who contributed to practice and policy, debate and definition. The category is, perhaps appropriately, somewhat diverse. Some of the 17 were civil servants and politicians, some classicists, some propagandists. Perhaps the book's sub-title draws the net rather wide, even for a period when historians were more likely to be counted as 'public intellectuals' than they are in our fallen age, certainly in the countries of 'the Commonwealth', if not in the US. In treating his characters, McIntyre avoids any attempt to apply terms like 'realist' or 'constructivist'. Perhaps they were often, of course, both.

The second part of the book is called Terminology. This explores the meaning of concepts and forms of words developed and employed within the British Commonwealth of Nations. It contains excellent expositions of notions like 'responsible government', 'dominion', 'dominion status', 'home rule', 'imperial preference', 'imperial defence'. The explanations are succinct, skilful, perceptive, laced at times with a touch of humour. Perhaps McIntyre could have told us in addition how premiers and prime ministers came to be distinct. Not to mention why ministers are still labelled 'Honourable' outside Britain, but not inside.

The longest part of the book is the third, entitled, a little misleadingly, Chronology. In fact it deals, chapter by chapter, with the series of changes through which the British Commonwealth emerged and mutated, describing and analysing them in a manner both accessible and authoritative. The first covers the rejection of any kind of imperial federal system; the second with the Irish Free State; the third with the Statute of Westminster; the fourth with India; the fifth with the role of the Crown, the concept of 'external association', the inclusion of republics and the adoption in the late 1940s of an idea that had appeared

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