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## INTRODUCTION

The interaction between people and place is the basic ingredient of human history. The historians who interpret this complex and ever-changing relationship are inevitably bit players in the processes they seek to unravel. In settler societies the terms of the relationship are re-negotiated and the heightened awareness of the new and the different reshapes expectations and communal attitudes. Shunted off from the handful of disparate settlements that owed their existence to mid-nineteenth-century British colonial expansion, the west coast of New Zealand's South Island stands at the edge of this experience. Its European history can be briefly put: home to Māori attracted by the presence of pounamu (greenstone), it remained little known until the discovery of gold produced a veritable human invasion that compressed and distorted the process of settlement and left in its wake a region in search of a future. In the century that followed, neither coal nor timber was able to overcome the twin tyrannies of remoteness and harshness. Historians who traversed this tale of brief, brilliant flowering giving way to a pervasive uncertainty born of reliance upon wasting natural assets inevitably cast their narratives within this framework—a framework that would seem introspective and limiting.

Yet, neither the tale itself nor the historians who tell it may be described adequately in such crudely environmentally determined terms. This discussion of a small slice of New Zealand's history examines how three writers—two historians and a novelist/social commentator—have interpreted the place of their birth and provided a foundation for a distinctive regional historical identity. Philip May, Patrick O'Farrell and Bill Pearson emerged as a talented trio of university-trained writers in the 1960s. They were products of an age when imperial ways of thinking about our past were giving way to more explicitly nationalist ones.

These stirrings were visible in the upsurge of provincial celebration that marked the passing of the first 100 years of European settlement. Within the historical profession the standard bearer of the new mood was Keith Sinclair's *A History of New Zealand* (1959), a nationalist account that emphasised the radical and innovatory and stressed New Zealand's Pacific environment.<sup>1</sup> It became the defining, if not uncontested, perspective for a generation of historians. Indeed, within a year, Bill Oliver produced an elegant counterpoint, *The Story of New Zealand* (1960).<sup>2</sup> As its author has subsequently written, it was 'determinedly provincial'<sup>3</sup> and presented the national experience as a conservative one played out within boundaries set by the 'foundational inheritance'.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, at the very moment that a national history was being made its shape was being challenged by historians whose essential point was that the regional building blocks that would allow safe generalisation remained to be written.<sup>5</sup> To a degree, the point became submerged in a contemporaneous debate about the emphases within the national story. Dressed in the garb of a provincial rivalry that saw the radical/nationalist position attributed to an Auckland school and the conservative/imperial associated with Canterbury, it was a characterisation that rested in part upon recognisable regional difference. In the 1940s and 1950s, the planned South Island colonies of Canterbury and Otago had led the way in celebrating and recording their respective histories.

As different as May, O'Farrell and Pearson's 'West Coasts' are, each derives something of its perspective from these currents of historical opinion. Their very choice of subject was a product of a new national consciousness. The published versions of their research came too late to influence the rival national histories of Sinclair and Oliver, but, as the product of a mid-nineteenth-century gold rush, the European settlement of the West Coast finds a place in the national story. It does so as a by-product of an ephemeral event whose consequences were judged of relatively little significance to the nationalist, radical theme. The region

1 Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, Auckland, Penguin, 1959.

2 W.H. Oliver, *The Story of New Zealand*, London, Faber and Faber, 1960.

3 W.H. Oliver, *Looking for the Phoenix*, Wellington, Bridget Williams Books, 2002, p. 97.

4 Oliver, *Looking for the Phoenix*, p. 97.

5 Elaborated in 1957 in a seminal article by W.J. (Jim) Gardner, 'Grass Roots and Dredge Tailings: Reflections on Local History', *Landfall* 43, vol. 11, no. 3, September 1957, pp. 221–33; and reprinted in W.J. Gardner, *Where They Lived: Studies in Local, Regional and Social History*, Christchurch, Regional Press, 1999, pp. 3–7; the theme is developed by W.H. Oliver in his influential 1969 Hocken Lecture, *Towards a New History?*, Hocken Library, University of Otago, 1971.

makes a reappearance as the home of militant industrial labour in the early twentieth century. Unlike the diggers of the 1860s, the coalminers, as socialist vanguard, assume a more obvious role in a political narrative that emphasises a radical nationalist impulse with its roots in late nineteenth-century liberalism and its culmination in the democratic socialism of the first Labour Government (1935–49).

In the quest for the synthesising generalities of a national story this might seem adequate representation of a remote and thinly populated region. In part this involves little more than acknowledging what one historian has called the ‘homogenising impulse’<sup>6</sup> held to be implicit in the notion of all national histories. The ‘West Coasts’ of May, O’Farrell and Pearson take their place alongside this emergent national story, at times confirming it, sometimes in exaggerated fashion, and at others offering a distinctiveness that suggests other frameworks that might be more compatible with the evolution of the region. Nowhere is this ambiguity more obvious than in the making of the region’s European settlement. Born of a gold rush that derived the great bulk of its people from the goldfields of the Pacific borderlands, the West Coast was cast in a different mould to the Wakefieldian planned settlements that preceded it. Such was its isolation that the region long remained a land apart. At times, it looked not eastwards to its political parent, the Canterbury province, but west to Melbourne and the goldfields of Victoria. It was from here that it derived capital as well as people and it was to Melbourne that the West Coast gold rushes yielded their profits. The movement of people to and fro across the Tasman Sea created a society that in its foundation years was truly Australasian. It was long to remain the region’s defining characteristic and its persistence is observed by O’Farrell and Pearson as they trace the fortunes of the coalmining communities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The ‘Australasianness’ of West Coast beginnings, with its emphasis upon the Pacific world rather than upon old-world and British links, sits comfortably with the emergent nationalist account. The Australasian connection did not, however, at least in its goldfields phase, extend to a common radical disposition. Phil May’s goldmining communities did not a Peter Lalor or a Eureka Stockade produce. Innovative as the diggers were in their quest for gold, theirs was the democracy of the enfranchised

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6 Desley Deacon, Penny Russell and Angela Woolacott, eds, *Transnational Ties: Australian Lives in the World*, Canberra, ANU E Press, 2008, p. xiv, make the point in discussing the making of an Australian national history.

small property owner. Pat O'Farrell's coalminers, led by a strong Victorian socialist vanguard, were, however, to play a crucial role in the radicalising burst of the early twentieth century that forms a crucial component of the radical/nationalist interpretation. And Bill Pearson's concerns encompass the erosion of this radical impulse as the coalfield communities began to mimic the goldtowns and head into terminal decline. In these ways the history of the West Coast that emerges in the 1960s from the work of May, O'Farrell and Pearson can be placed within the dominant historiographical impulses.

In the strength and persistence of its Australasian dimension, West Coast history displays, in exaggerated form, a strand of the more general antipodean experience. As a land apart, building connections where it could, the West Coast story unfolded in ways that were broadly consistent with settler societies everywhere. In its foundation phase when all seemed different and the need for common bonds was more urgent, difference mattered less. The negotiation of difference was part of the pioneering process. It was as obvious in dress, accent and religious observance as it was in mining techniques and attitudes to authority. Behind these visible and public differences lay patterns of connectedness that spilled beyond the boundaries of any one nation state. Whatever the homogenising tendencies implicit in the new national history, it could not be said that the New Zealand variety of the species was blind to the variety of regional and individual experiences that shaped its national story. Unsurprisingly, initial critiques of what came to be called the radical nationalist tradition were more concerned with labelling it as an 'Auckland' interpretation than with attempting to suggest that the New Zealand story needed to be cast in an imperial mould.

In defining their 'West Coasts', Phil May, Pat O'Farrell and Bill Pearson stand at even greater distance from the imperial connection. That they do so is not so much a matter of calculation as a question of time and place. As a trio of writers, their regional historiographical antecedents amounted to little more than a few celebratory works surveying the region's first 50 years. Written in the 1920s, they were optimistic and imperial in tone. By the 1950s and 1960s the optimism and the sense of a past linked inextricably with the fortunes of Empire had given way to less sanguine assessments suggesting a future no less problematic than the past. As different as their 'West Coasts' were, each is shaped by a sense of a land set apart. They were 'West Coasts' whose integration into the wider national fabric was at best partial, yet whose experiences

nonetheless reflected, if often in exaggerated form, a distinctively New Zealand experience that paradoxically derived some of its character from the persistence of its links with Australia and the borderlands of the Pacific.

It should then come as no surprise that Australia should play a significant role in shaping the academic interests of all three writers. Each made his way to The Australian National University (ANU), an institution whose origins were rooted in the same post–World War II sense of reconstruction that invigorated the writing of New Zealand history. Its very name stood, as W.K. Hancock wrote, ‘like a defiant flag, [announcing] we are marching forward, we measure ourselves against the world!’<sup>7</sup> O’Farrell was the first of the trio to make his way to the new university taking shape in Canberra. After completing his MA at the University of Canterbury in 1954, he was awarded a PhD scholarship in history in the Research School of Social Sciences. His study of the West Coast labour movement had emphasised the role played by an influx of radical Australian coalminers in the ideological ferment that produced the New Zealand Labour Party in 1916. It was a theme that led to a biography of Harry Holland; a Queanbeyan-born, militant socialist, prolific pamphleteer and pacifist, MP for a West Coast mining electorate and leader of the New Zealand Labour Party, 1919–33.<sup>8</sup>

Bill Pearson’s road to Canberra was less direct. Slightly older than O’Farrell and May, he had embarked on a PhD in London in the late 1940s and his ‘West Coast phase’ was largely the work of an ‘expat’ writing from Hampstead Heath. In 1967, however, just three years after the eventual publication of *Coal Flat*,<sup>9</sup> he was putting the finishing touches to *Henry Lawson Among Maoris*<sup>10</sup> while holding a senior research fellowship in the Department of Pacific History and studying imaginative literature in English on the Pacific islands. This was the beginning of a new strand in his literary development. And while it would be too long a shot to see the West Coast as contributing significantly to this, it is consistent with an interest in the environment that had shaped his early thoughts on New Zealand society. That it was ANU that provided this opportunity reflected the peculiar openness of this post–World War II university to its Australasian and Pacific environment.<sup>11</sup>

7 W.K. Hancock, *Country and Calling*, London, Faber and Faber, 1954, p. 236.

8 P.J. O’Farrell, *Harry Holland: Militant Socialist*, Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1964.

9 Bill Pearson, *Coal Flat*, Auckland & Hamilton, Paul’s Book Arcade, 1963.

10 W.H. Pearson, *Henry Lawson Among Maoris*, Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1968.

11 Helen Irving and Stuart Macintyre, eds, *No Ordinary Act: Essays on Federation and the Constitution by J.A. La Nauze*, Carlton, Victoria, Melbourne University Press, 2001.

Pearson was to be joined at ANU, in 1969, by Phil May. After the publication of *West Coast Gold Rushes* in 1962 he had begun developing further his thoughts about the interconnectedness of the goldfields bordering the Pacific. This led in 1967 to a year's study leave in California and, in 1969, he took up a two-year appointment as a senior research fellow in history at the ANU Research School of Social Sciences. The fellowship was part of a program designed to allow academics time away from teaching duties to complete major projects. At the time, the History Department was headed by John La Nauze (1911–1989), whose two major works—a biography of Alfred Deakin and the *Making of the Australian Constitution*—made him unquestionably the leading historian of Australian Federation.<sup>12</sup> He had succeeded Keith Hancock and, as Stuart Macintyre has written, brought a 'less directive' attitude to the position and 'likened his department to a potting shed where individuals propagated their various cuttings'.<sup>13</sup> La Nauze had been born in the Western Australian goldfields town of Boulder and it may not have been entirely coincidental that goldfield studies bloomed brightly in his department in the late 1960s. Whether by accident or design, Phil May took his place in the potting shed alongside Weston Bate, then nurturing his study of Ballarat published in 1978 as *Lucky City: The First Generation at Ballarat 1851–1901*.<sup>14</sup> ANU was itself the product of the post–World War II upsurge of interest in Australian history and culture. Its establishment and the fillip it gave to Australian history was a matter of some envy amongst New Zealand historians. In practice it proved to be something approaching an Australasian university, actively seeking and encouraging New Zealand historians. And, as the individual case studies that make up this collection show, the West Coast, standing proud against the Tasman Sea, had strong and lasting links with Australia (and especially Melbourne and Victoria).

That was certainly how it seemed to me in 1969 as I contemplated following in the footsteps of May, O'Farrell and Pearson. As an undergraduate, I was taught by Phil May and it was with him, on the eve of his departure for California, that I first discussed taking up the story of West Coast labour from where O'Farrell left off—at the

12 J.A. La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin*, Carlton, Victoria, Melbourne University Press, 1965; J.A. La Nauze, *The Making of the Australian Constitution*, Carlton, Victoria, Melbourne University Press, 1972.

13 Irving and Macintyre, *No Ordinary Act*.

14 Weston Bate, *Lucky City: The First Generation at Ballarat 1851–1901*, Carlton, Victoria, Melbourne University Press, 1978.

outset of World War I—as my MA thesis topic. With Jim Gardner and David McIntyre, May taught an Honours paper in comparative history (Australian, Canadian, United States and New Zealand history) precisely at the time he was formulating his projected study of the goldfields of the Pacific borderlands. Jim Gardner, who had been teaching undergraduate courses in Australian history, was fresh from study leave in Adelaide where he had pursued, among other things, the Australasian genesis of the idea of industrial conciliation and arbitration.<sup>15</sup> It was Jim Gardner, Canterbury’s most celebrated historian and supervisor of the West Coast theses of Phil May and Pat O’Farrell, who became my supervisor in 1966. In 1969–70, as a temporary assistant lecturer, I was to teach one of Phil May’s undergraduate courses while he spent two years at ANU. When I arrived in Canberra in January 1971 to take up a PhD scholarship and once more follow in the footsteps of Pat O’Farrell, Phil May was preparing to return to the University of Canterbury. There he would launch an Honours paper on the goldfields of the Pacific borderlands that he was to teach until his tragic death, at 47 years of age, in 1977.

I had returned from ANU in 1974 to join Jim Gardner in teaching what we called ‘Australasian History’ at first- and second-year levels. La Nauze seized the chance to prick the surrender of Kiwi sensitivities implicit in the convenient label: was it not, he asked, like the New Zealand cricket side accepting a place in the Sheffield Shield competition?<sup>16</sup> There was of course more than convenience involved in the label. It recognised that the published body of New Zealand history emanating from the universities lagged at least a decade behind its Australian counterpart. In very large part, this reflected the strength of the imperial connection: Britain was the destination of choice for postgraduate study. It is a point nowhere more plainly acknowledged than in W.H. Oliver’s confession that, when he sat down to write his *Story of New Zealand* in the late 1950s, great was his ignorance of his country’s history. Like many of his contemporaries, he had ‘studiously avoided’ New Zealand history and made his way to Balliol College, Oxford, and the English history that he believed ‘snobbishly’, as he later recalled, was ‘in the mainstream of historical scholarship’.<sup>17</sup> Plainly, the possibilities offered by ANU presented a way of redressing the

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15 W.J. Gardner, *Prelude to Arbitration in 3 Movements: Ulster, South Australia, New Zealand 1890–1894*, Christchurch, W.J. Gardner, 2009.

16 C. Connolly and L. Richardson, ‘Kiwi and Kangaroo: Teaching Australian History to New Zealanders’, *Australian Historical Association Bulletin*, no. 15, June 1978, pp. 7–10.

17 Oliver, *Looking for the Phoenix*, p. 96.

slower development of New Zealand's academic historical community. As a relatively new institution intent upon fostering greater awareness of its antipodean environment, it offered a congenial intellectual environment for New Zealanders embarking upon postgraduate study. At ANU they might tackle subjects that were, if not specifically related to aspects of New Zealand history, focused upon parts of the Australian story touching upon themes that were part of a common Australasian experience. Nor was the academic trans-Tasman traffic a one-way affair. When Jim Gardner retired at the end of the 1976 academic year, his successor was Chris Connolly, a product of the University of New England, who had completed his PhD in La Nauze's 'potting shed' at ANU.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, Pat O'Farrell, Bill Pearson and Phil May were the frontrunners of a trend that was to maintain its momentum into the 1970s and 1980s, and beyond.

While the purely West Coast dimension of the ANU connection faded over time, continuities that reflect a common historical pedigree are evident in the flow of postgraduate students who made their way from Canterbury to Canberra. In the 1970s, the sense of place and of regionality found expression in a study of the labour movement in Wollongong and an examination of pastoralism in the Hunter Valley.<sup>19</sup> Each had been preceded by a regional New Zealand study. In the 1980s, ANU was as attractive to a cluster of Canterbury postgraduates who were at the forefront of women's history. For them, as for their predecessors, the attraction of ANU was to be found in the extent to which Australia provided a more developed historiography than was then available in the New Zealand environment. Their interests were diverse. Libby Plumridge studied New Zealand expat women artists and how, as women and artists, they negotiated the circumstances of colonialism and gender. Philippa Mein Smith moved from work on pregnancy and childbirth in New Zealand 1920–35 (extended and published in 1986 as *Maternity in Dispute*<sup>20</sup>) to study infant welfare in Australia from 1900 until the end of World War II. Melanie Nolan's Canterbury MA thesis was a study of the workers' representative on the arbitration court (from which was to emerge a path-breaking work in

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18 Other Australians to make their way to the Canterbury University History Department and teach Australian or Pacific history were Luke Trainor, Ian Campbell, Peter Hempenstall and Jane Buckingham.

19 Len Richardson, 'The Labour Movement in Wollongong, New South Wales, 1928–39', PhD thesis, ANU, 1974; Stevan Eldred-Grigg, 'The Pastoral Families of the Hunter Valley, 1880–1914', PhD thesis, ANU, 1978.

20 Philippa Mein Smith, *Maternity in Dispute, New Zealand 1920–1939*, Wellington, Historical Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, New Zealand, 1986.

collective biography as well as the publication of the Jack McCullough diaries<sup>21</sup>) and led her into Australian labour history and a doctoral thesis on Victorian women workers.<sup>22</sup> Yet, as different as these paths are, they share a common framework that is very much the product of their distinctively Australian and New Zealand perspectives.

In their academic careers, Melanie Nolan and Philippa Mein Smith further exemplify the trans-Tasman connection lying at the heart of the West Coast past that May, O'Farrell and Pearson endeavoured to capture in their writing. While professor of history at the University of Canterbury, Philippa Mein Smith headed the New Zealand, Australia Research Centre and co-authored *A History of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific*,<sup>23</sup> and Melanie Nolan, as Professor of History, Director of the National Centre for Biography and General Editor of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, has continued to expand the trans-Tasman dimension to the histories of Australia and New Zealand.<sup>24</sup>

If the trans-Tasman dimension of the West Coast experience has a long and fruitful life, other elements of the region's past have proved equally productive. An examination of the writing of West Coast historians since the 1960s suggests the flowering of an increasingly distinctive regional voice that extends the interpretations of the foundational histories.

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21 Melanie Nolan, ed., *War & Class: The Diary of Jack McCullough*, Wellington, Dunmore Publishing, 2009; Melanie Nolan, *Kin: A Collective Biography of a New Zealand Working-Class Family*, Christchurch, Canterbury University Press, 2005.

22 Elizabeth Plumridge, 'The Negotiation of Circumstance: New Zealand Women Artists, c.1890–1914', PhD thesis, ANU, 1985; Melanie Nolan, 'Uniformity and Diversity: A Case Study of Female Shop and Office Workers in Victoria, 1880 to 1939', PhD thesis, ANU, 1989; Philippa Mein Smith, 'Reformers, Mothers and Babies: Aspects of Infant Survival Australia 1890–1945', PhD thesis, ANU, 1990 (revised and published as *Mothers and King Baby: Infant Survival and Welfare in an Imperial World, 1880–1950*, London, Macmillan, 1997).

23 Donald Denoon and Philippa Mein Smith with Marivic Wyndham, *A History of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000; Philippa Mein Smith, *A Concise History of New Zealand*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2005; Philippa Mein Smith, Peter Hempenstall, Shaun Goldfinch, with Stuart McMillan and Rosemary Baird, *Remaking the Tasman World*, Christchurch, Canterbury University Press, 2008.

24 The following works by Melanie Nolan in whole or in part pursue Australasian and West Coast themes: 'Personalising Class Conflict across the Tasman: The New Zealand Great Strike and Trans-Tasman Biography', *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, no. 18, December 2014, pp. 118–36; 'The View from Over the Hill': Developing a Balanced View of Blackball '08 from a Wider Range of Perspectives', *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, no. 8, April 2009, pp. 1–27. Recent PhD theses completed in history at ANU that pursue Australasian themes: Karen Fox, 'Representing Difference: Celebrated Māori and Aboriginal Women and the Print Media, 1950–2000', 2009; Catherine Bishop, 'Commerce Was a Woman: Women in Colonial Sydney and Wellington', 2012; Shelley Richardson, 'Family Experiments: Professional Middle-Class Families in Australia and New Zealand c. 1880–1920', 2013; Nicola Francis, 'My Own Sort of Heaven', Rosalie Gascoigne's Stellar Rise to Artistic Acclaim', 2015.

In doing so, it explores how subsequent historians have responded to the changing face of twentieth-century capitalism as it reshaped the pattern of existence within the region. As a region whose economy was built around two dominant extractive industries—coalmining and sawmilling—the post-industrial age raised fundamental questions about the future. As it did in industrial wastelands throughout the Western world, the ‘retreat’ of industrial capitalism created a social as well as an economic vacuum. The adjustments called for by changes in the economic structure struck at the very heart of a regional identity that drew heavily upon a deeply embedded past and respected the vagaries of an enduring and forbidding environment. These understandings of time and place were important components in the framing of a body of writing that is as distinctive as the foundational literature from which it grows.

The dislocation undergone by industrial communities in the post-industrial age that has recently been thrust to the forefront of British and American politics is the Grey Valley experience writ large. What gave the Grey Valley response to change its special character, and set it apart from the American rust belt and the north of England, was the conjunction of industrial decline and the rise of environmentalism. Influenced by the wilderness aesthetic and focused upon the preservation of the natural environment, the conservation movement envisaged the West Coast’s native forests as a heritage estate and potential national park. The debate that followed, in New Zealand as elsewhere, was often conducted in a moral landscape and in the language of extremes. An Australian historian has recently characterised this ideological battleground as being framed within a simple dichotomy: ‘between the unused landscape and the misused one, the pristine landscape and the exploited and degraded one’.<sup>25</sup> On the West Coast, this divide could not be and was not simply, or even mainly, an ideological one. It posed fundamental questions about regional identity and understandings of local environments. The responses to the arrival of the environmentalists were shaped in part by the economic interests of the sawmilling industry and those who depended upon it. Just as assuredly, Grey Valley reaction to the rise of conservationism was rooted in a ‘sense of belonging’ and its companion, history.

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25 Tom Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel: Historians and Their Craft*, Carlton, Victoria, Black Inc., 2016, p. 60.

Environmentalists often patronised the past. Their polemic, according to one critic, could ‘flatten the past into an undifferentiated and hateful caricature, beyond redemption, where ordinary men and women have no control over their lives’.<sup>26</sup> The insensitivity to regional understandings of local environments that frequently characterised early conservation campaigns was as evident in the Grey Valley as elsewhere. Even more apparent, as is made clear in recent Grey Valley historical writing, is the ease with which disdain for the past could lead to compromises that limited the future. As but a small episode within the wider debate about humanity’s engagement with the natural environment, the issue of how best to preserve large tracts of its pristine natural bush represents a critical juncture in the region’s history. The 1986 Accord between the Labour Government, industry and environmental organisations, which effectively set out the terms of the West Coast’s future, offered a compromise that sanctioned a degree of selective logging of native timber while proclaiming the greater part of West Coast bush a national park. Few expected the compromise to survive. Fewer still were surprised when the Helen Clark-led Labour Government simply imposed a ban on the milling of native timber. It was a step that invigorated a latent ‘narrative of betrayal’<sup>27</sup> that had taken root as successive governments stepped away from subsidies and regional development schemes that offered some protection against the economic stagnation threatening to engulf the Grey Valley.

It was a narrative of betrayal already gathering momentum amid the wind-down of the coal industry. The process became inextricably interwoven with history and politics. In the days when coal was king, the Grey Valley coaltowns were in the vanguard of the drive for industrial and political changes that laid the foundation for the nation’s variant of democratic socialism. The rupture between ethos and doctrine that followed the election of the fourth Labour Government thus struck at the very heart of the region’s identity. The rolling back of the state and deregulation of the economy and industrial relations that followed left the future of the region and its people more compromised than ever. These new uncertainties, aided by electoral redistribution and the introduction of a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system in the 1996 general election, transformed the political environment that had for more than 70 years shaped a Labour heartland. In 1991, for the first time since 1918,

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26 Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel*, p. 88.

27 The theme is explored in Paul Maunder, *Coal and the Coast: A Reflection on the Pike River Disaster*, Christchurch, Canterbury University Press, 2012.

Grey Valley workers found themselves represented by a non-Labour MP. Labour recovered the seat three years later but the old predictability was gone; in 2008 voters under the new MMP system delivered a second National Party representative.

This changing economic and political environment gave rise to a new and distinctive form of regional radicalism. A much fractured collection of interest groups that reached backwards to the pit socialism flourishing when the coalfields were in their pomp, the new voice of protest grew in volume as the twin pillars of the local economy—coal and timber—succumbed before the combined onslaught of two unlikely accomplices: neoliberalism and environmentalism. At the time, the embryonic regional protest was dismissed by the political elites as politically regressive or, as Helen Clark described its more extreme fraction, a feral and inbred response to change. This elitist contempt for populist resistance added fuel to the ‘betrayal strain’ within regional resistance and shaped the political approach to the reorganisation of the coal industry. Here, the unthinking disciples of the nineteenth-century doctrines of unregulated capitalism, decked out in the new and dangerous garb of neoliberalism, dismantled the complex and interlocking body of mining and labour legislation upon which the safe operation of the pits depended. The ideology that drove the political and economic transformation and its quest for managerial efficiency placed communities and their understandings of their relationship with their working environments at the mercy of the market.

Regions or communities exposed to the dictates of the market received scant respect from political elites in thrall to the nostrums of neoliberalism. Claims to ‘exceptionalism’ were dismissed as special pleading or simply ignored. The cavalier shovelling aside of the past and its lessons was especially blind to the understandings of place and the sense of ‘belonging’ that came with generational continuity and occupational cohesion. The recent history of the Grey Valley, if not the West Coast in its entirety, has seen a clash of cultures. An older and withering regional industrial community has confronted an emergent, national political elite bent upon remaking the nation’s economy. Steeped in the traditions and customs bestowed by history and sensitive to the precariousness of their relationship with the land, they were working communities accustomed to making haste slowly and in their workplaces valued experience over theory. The certainties that drove the agents of the new corporate age and their quest for change seemed to mining communities to presage a return to what an earlier generation of miners had dubbed the ‘tyranny

of the manager'. The essential first step in banishing the authority of the old order was the destruction of the industrial legislation built over generations by mining communities that democratised the enforcement of safety procedures.

Above all else, the New Zealand Labour Party elite of the 1980s and 1990s privileged change. To Grey Valley mining towns, the Lange Government's fulsome endorsement of the market economy struck a deadly blow to the party's rationale. The party that had built the welfare state now led the nation, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, to become one of the 'most inegalitarian' of the 'developed market economies'.<sup>28</sup> Labour was in the process of rejecting its own history and indeed the very idea of a labour movement. By denying a past in which the lived experience of working communities had been the basis for a progressive democracy, the 'Rogernomics' regime with its rigid adherence to the market economy put paid to values that had sustained the Labour Party since its formation in 1916.<sup>29</sup> Opposition to change was cast as being rooted in nostalgia, obstructionist or misguided. Once the lifeblood of a fluid, open and participatory democracy, the labour movement had simply become a burdensome addendum to the bureaucratic party machine highjacked by an inner cabal. In thrall to the new neoliberal doctrines, as revealed to them by Treasury ideologues, the fourth Labour Government effectively set itself adrift from its traditional base.

This then is the context in which the second generation of West Coast historical writing takes root. It is a context in which past and future remain starkly present. At times they rub up against each other in ways that create a friction reminiscent of that present in Pat O'Farrell's response to Phil May's *The West Coast Gold Rushes*.<sup>30</sup> He detected in May's history an over-identification with the place and the people of the golden age. The historian as he saw it, could not present the past on its own terms and was obliged to adopt the role of social critic. The validity, or otherwise, of this critique is discussed later. Here, it is sufficient to observe that Bill Pearson rather than any other author discussed in this book adopts the stance of social critic. Even so, if there is a shift in the emphases of recent

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28 Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*, London, Abacus, 1995, p. 407.

29 The name 'Rogernomics' derives from the Christian name of Roger Owen Douglas, Minister of Finance in the David Lange-led Labour Government, 1984–1990.

30 P.J. O'Farrell, 'Review: P. R. May, *The West Coast Gold Rushes*. Christchurch, Pegasus Press, Second Revised Edition, 1967', *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 3, no. 1, April 1969, pp. 89–90.

Grey Valley writing it is one that takes its particular form from within an environment in which the past was being deconstructed and the future reshaped in new directions. The Grey Valley found itself confronted by a most unlikely ideological combination—they were caught between the unbending disciples of the market economy and their counterparts within late twentieth-century environmentalism.

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