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Abstract

Jagged Seas is a commissioned history of the New Zealand Seamen's Union (rebranded the New Zealand Seafarers' Union following amalgamation with the Cooks' and Stewards' Union in 1990) from its beginnings in 1879 until it merged in 2002/03 with the New Zealand Waterfront Workers' Union to form the Maritime Union of New Zealand. Author David Grant has a background in journalism and teaching, and a significant publication record in the research and writing of New Zealand labour movement, and dissident, anti-militarist, histories.

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David Grant, *Jagged Seas: The New Zealand Seamen's Union, 1879-2003*, Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 2012, pp. 383, \$NZ55, paper.

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A previous history of the Union, by Conrad Bollinger, was published in 1968. Grant generously acknowledges and cites this pioneering work, but notes that voluminous records have since become available for research, and justifiably argues these, plus a revisiting of the original materials used by Bollinger, warrant a full history from the beginning, and not just a history of the period since the 1960s.

Grant's book is profusely illustrated, with a clean, uncluttered, layout, the accessible text following a chronological framework. The text is variously interspersed with inserts illustrating or elaborating incidents, characters, historical aspects. There are thirty-eight pages of endnotes. Overall the book invites the general reader, the browser, and the scholar, with a detailed index assisting access and use.

Read as a commissioned history of a trade union that no longer exists, *Jagged Seas* delivers the requirements of the genre. It narrates the history of an industrial organisation, its highs and lows, the often internecine politics, the struggles to improve wages and conditions, the successes and the failures, over its 125 year lifespan, and records the cavalcade of individuals who variously led and/or influenced it over the years.

According to Grant, seafarers have always been the people the New Zealand public "have loved to hate", and "the butt of universal anger", which he argues is unwarranted since they are also the workers the sea-reliant nation of islands has depended upon for its survival and prosperity, the negative image one deliberately cultivated and exploited by the interests of capital. In Grant's view, so far as politicians, the media, employers are concerned, trade unions are tolerable when they act on the periphery, for example commenting upon work closures or picking up the pieces of capitalist failures, but unwelcome when successfully organised and engaging politically/industrially centre stage "with confident leaders and able negotiators" determined to improve the lot of the workers they represent. It is with this worldview in place that Grant builds *Jagged Seas*.

On one hand *Jagged Seas* is an institutional history, on another a social and political history about a work force regarded by many outside the seafaring industry with animus, doing a job that has been, and in many ways still is, injurious and deadly, an industry that is inherently exploitive when it can be. It is an industry outsiders tend not to understand, yet an industry vital to the well being of the New Zealand nation. *Jagged Seas* delivers the goods as an institutional history, a point noted earlier; as social and political history it successfully demonstrates the ways in which organised New Zealand seafarers have engaged with society and politics beyond the

communality of the seas and waterfronts, and, using their strategic position within the economy, gained agency and made history from below.

In the end, however, *Jagged Seas* is ‘another’ institutional history, and the question should be asked, why bother with an historical genre that is so traditionally old-hat in this flexibly inventive and creative era of post-postmodernism and attendant plethora of sub-isms? For me the answer is simple: there are any number of rich and powerful interests intent on sapping from ordinary people their capacities for agency in history, of limiting or confusing their awareness of past examples of such agency, of denying citizens power apart from periodic outings to the ballot box, signing petitions, writing letters to the editor, social networking, and the like. But real agency?, real power?, the sort of muscle you get from organising and going to the barricades, metaphorical or otherwise, of building institutions capable of contesting wealth and privilege and state power? Preferably no, because this sort of agency makes history surprising, denying the quietist ‘end to history’ that represents Utopia for conservatives.

The telling of stories like those in *Jagged Seas* remains important, for if this sort of telling stops, then we move towards the end-days, floundering and choking in a political/cultural version of what the old blind radical poet/pamphleteer once called The Slough of Despond.

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