

# IN SEARCH OF PEMBER REEVES

**I**N the Auckland suburb of Ponsonby there is a short, insignificant thoroughfare sloping down into Freeman's Bay. It is Pember Reeves Street. W.1, and the name commemorates a man who was born in New Zealand 100 years ago. Possibly a well-read resident could tell you that Pember Reeves was some sort of author; a student living there would say he was a politician, or an elderly lady might remember him as Agent-General for New Zealand in London before she departed for the colonies. In other streets or in other towns, with the possible exception of Christchurch, memories or knowledge of Pember Reeves must be very rare. Yet he was probably the most brilliant public man New Zealand has ever known.

A two-fold attempt to create a more general interest in the life and work of William Pember Reeves is now being made by Dr Keith Sinclair, senior lecturer in history at Auckland University. For the past three years he has been collecting material for a full-scale biography which, he hopes, will be ready for publication in two years' time. Secondly, he has prepared three talks on Reeves's career which, together with a fourth programme of readings from Reeves's prose, poetry and letters, are to be broadcast by the YC stations. The first talk will be broadcast on Monday, November 4, by 1YC at 7.0 p.m., and by 3YC at 7.35 p.m.

Dr Sinclair's researches have taken him all over New Zealand, to Britain and to the United States. He has interviewed many people who knew Reeves or knew of him, and he has spent many hours with Reeves's relatives and descendants both here and overseas. But this work, says Dr Sinclair, had rarely been dull, for Reeves's life would be worthy of study even if he had been a lesser man. He knew personally the great majority of the people he wrote about in *The Long White Cloud* ("The most literary book about New Zealand," claims Alan Mulgan), and his experience of public affairs covered a tremendous slice of New Zealand history. While this means that no general historian can safely ignore Reeves, it also means that Reeves's biographer must be uncommonly industrious in covering not only his life but the formative years of the Dominion which it spanned.

But Reeves was not a lesser politician, any more than he was a lesser man of letters. He is frequently referred to in the histories as the intellectual of the Ballance and Seddon Ministries and as their sole representative of "culture." And this was sometimes embarrassing to him. C. J. Wray, in his introduction to the third edition of *The Long White Cloud*, recalled that "his intellectual ability and the integrity of his character were freely recognised even by his opponents, who frequently paid him compliments which, as he once said, he would have valued more highly if they had not been at the expense of his colleagues. He . . . was by far the most effective debater in the House of Representatives, where his speeches had a conciseness and literary finish which is there far from conspicuous, more especially on his own side of the House." Reeves, then, was a rarity among New Zealand politicians; and, because he never sought popularity, was never a popular public figure. The

contrast with his chief, Coaster Dick Seddon, was striking, and it seemed in character with the man that Reeves in 1896 forsook the rough and tumble of colonial politics for the post of Agent-General.

Unlike most of the prominent men in the colony, William Pember Reeves was a New Zealander born and bred and, Dr Sinclair points out, he never ceased to take an interest in New Zealand. Until he resigned the Agent-Generalship in 1908 he acted for the Colony more as a trade commissioner than as a diplomat; and even after that, while he was Director of the London School of Economics and Political Science (1908-1919), he was a director of the National Bank of New Zealand and later chairman of directors.

In the field of letters Pember Reeves won distinction as poet, historian and journalist. Educated at Christ's College Grammar School and at the Canterbury Collegiate Union (the forerunner of the University), he became editor of the *Canterbury Times* and, in 1889, of the *Lyttelton Times*, of which his father was manager. Apart from *The Long White Cloud* he also wrote a two-volume work on social legislation called *State Experiments in Australia and New Zealand*.

To refer to Reeves merely as an intellectual is unjust. He was New Zealand's first Minister of Labour, an office

he administered with vigour. He also represented Canterbury at Rugby and cricket. In other words, Reeves was not only brilliant but an all rounder. Add to this his interest in the Anglo-Hellenic Society, which he started in England before World War I, and his devotion to the theories of the Fabian Society (he gave New Zealand in 1890 its first published account of Marxism), and one begins to appreciate the difficulties this many-sided man presents to his biographer.

Dr Sinclair told *The Listener* that a particular difficulty was to discover the personal side of Reeves's life. No love letters or anything of a similar nature have yet been uncovered, and little is known of Reeves's relations with his wife. As a man he was cold and aloof, yet to people whose interests were similar to his own, he could be warm and friendly. His conversation was witty and he was said to be one of the finest after-dinner speakers in London.

Reeves spent more than half his life in England, and Dr Sinclair has found there much material for his biography. He met Reeves's daughter, the well-known writer and novelist, Amber Blanco White, who gave him all the Reeves papers in her possession. Among them was the largest collection of Seddon letters ever discovered. But, more important for Dr Sinclair's purpose,



DR KEITH SINCLAIR  
Missing: One collection of letters

they also contained the notes written by Reeves in his old age for his memoirs.

"Then I had fantastic luck," said Dr Sinclair. "At the Institute of Commonwealth Studies a librarian gave me a catalogue of a book sale, and the first thing listed was Pember Reeves's commonplace books—his scrapbooks of notes and newspaper clippings. By the time I reached the sale they had been sold, but I badgered the assistant for the name of the buyer and he let me have them."

Dr Sinclair told us of another experience in America, where he spent three months in 1955 on a Carnegie Grant. In Madison, Wisconsin, he made inquiries about H. D. Lloyd, an American writer of two books about New Zealand, which painted the colony as a paradise. One of these books, *A Country Without Strikes*, praised the Liberal Government's labour legislation, including the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act, of which Reeves was the chief architect. In Madison Dr Sinclair learnt that Lloyd had known Reeves quite well, had written and asked him for information on New Zealand, and he also found there some two dozen letters that Reeves had written to Lloyd.

"It was just chance that I picked up Reeves's letters in Madison," said Dr Sinclair, "and there's just a chance I may yet hear of another collection which has gone missing in Canterbury. Before she died in Christchurch a few years ago, Reeves's sister Nell possessed letters which he had written to his mother. It's possible that Nell passed them on to a friend, but since her death no one has seen them. If they still exist they would be of great value to me."

The three talks which Dr Sinclair will broadcast will cover the youth of William Pember Reeves, his sympathies for the working man and his social outlook, Reeves's relations with Seddon and his position as a writer, poet and historian. Apart from the biography, which he is still working on, Dr Sinclair has published two books of verse and several articles and monographs on New Zealand history. He has also written two other works to be published shortly. One is *The Origin of the Maori Wars* (University of New Zealand Press), and the other is a history of New Zealand in the Pelican series.



WILLIAM PEMBER REEVES  
A rarity among New Zealand politicians