

## **Working Lives c.1900 – A Photographic Essay**

ERIK OLSEN

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This is an attractive, soft-covered book from Professor Erik Olsen of Otago University. Combining a lively essay with numerous images, it is presented in a style, without dense academic citation, that makes it accessible to the general reader, but still has a useful Select Bibliography for those wanting more. Overall this works well, although at times the book may seem to bear too much, wavering between Olsen's desire to produce an attractive but informative photographic essay, and his determination to provide as much detailed information as possible.

Some may be misled by the general sounding 'Working Lives' of the title. In fact, this is a local historical study centred on industrial south Dunedin around 1900. Olsen makes the link to the more general with his contention that the working lives he is concerned with were a major influence in New Zealand's developing vision of itself as a new, modern and more progressive state built on greater equality and fairness. This is one of many interesting arguments in the book. However, it is probably asking too much of the essay to fully sustain the general implications of its title.

Instead, as Olsen makes clear, this essay and its core images come directly out of his leading work on what is known as the Caversham project – a thirty-year detailed academic study of industrial south Dunedin. This area, known locally as 'the Flat', incorporated the suburbs of Caversham, South Dunedin and Kensington, and later St Kilda and St Clair. Making easily comprehensible his much more detailed work from this study is where this book really shines. Whether or not you agree with all he asserts, Olsen's considerable knowledge and his obvious affection for 'the Flat' is contagious. His frequent use of such terms as 'lads' and 'lasses', and his mastery of the various sectarian and 'ethnic' divisions in the different United Kingdom tribes, adds to the interest and sense of place.

Olsen is especially concerned with particular kinds of working lives in the older and more industrialised part of 'the Flat' during its rapid growth. His key themes are the importance of imported craft and trade skills and knowledge required to transform 'wild landscape' to farms and then industrial heartland. His choice means, however, that the focus is mainly on skilled men, United Kingdom immigrants, and those living in

close proximity to the older industrial part of 'the Flat'. Other kinds of workers, even on the 'the Flat', or in the rest of Dunedin, receive much less attention. Olssen notes, for example, that young, unmarried women were leaving skilled trades, such as tailoring, and domestic service in droves, for growing opportunities in factories and shops. The experience of tangata whenua (inconsistently Kai Tahu and Ngai Tahu) is barely mentioned.

However, this is also a photographic essay, and Olssen's choice of images is a major strength. Anyone who has attempted to research illustrations for working lives knows how difficult it can be to find fresh and compelling ones. Olssen has made good use of the fact that in his period photographs were taken to document pride in industrial progress. This includes, for example, capturing the impressive but now sadly closed Dunedin Hillside railway workshops and those in the Dunedin Drainage Board album. As might be expected with a photographic essay, Olssen provides interesting (but too brief) information on some of these photographers and their work.

Olssen has also followed a generally successful approach of including not only images of workers and workplaces, but also of other aspects of their lives. These range from streetscapes to industrial buildings, to scenes of family life, to leisure pursuits and political involvement. Some even show business and entrepreneurial activities, including a photo of members of the Dunedin Stock Exchange. This also benefits from Olssen's looking well to each side of 'around 1900', as early as the 1850s through to the 1930s. In context, this works and doesn't need his not entirely convincing link between his central time period and Queen Victoria.

The result is more than 120 black and white photographs in a variety of sizes up to full-page and double-page spreads supplemented by a variety of other images. These include paintings (two reproduced in colour), newspaper advertisements, cartoons, leaflets, and other ephemera. There are also two very useful, although untitled, location maps of south Dunedin. Most of these images are fresh and evocative. Most are of Dunedin, and from Dunedin sources, including the Hocken Library, Dunedin City Council, Toitu Otago Settlers Museum, Dunedin Public Library, Kings High School and private companies, such as McKinlays Footwear. Additional images are sourced from major national institutions, including the Alexander Turnbull Library, Archives NZ and Te Papa. Occasionally, Olssen has looked further afield for images of themes or activities he wants to highlight. This is reasonable but works less well for me. Many, such as of the fight outside the Petone railway workshops,

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and of women shopping in a Wellington department store (both from ATL) are already well-known, easily available on websites and published.

The accompanying descriptions, or legends, contain much of the really new information in this book; and some are so lengthy and detailed they almost constitute a secondary text. Though sometimes over-long, they also contain much of interest. The description for one photograph, for example, points out how headwear could instantly reveal a person's social standing at the time. However, this format is more difficult to read and distracting to the layout of the main text and text boxes. On the plus side, it emphasises this is no slight coffee table work and the determined reader gets plenty of bonus information.

Overall, this book is a well-illustrated and thought-provoking discussion about early industrial Dunedin and even its implications for wider New Zealand. It is timely, as well, given that 'around' a century later, studies are consistently telling us that, not only is our manufacturing sector rapidly disappearing, so is our vision of a more fair and egalitarian society.

*Cathy Marr  
Wellington*