

BOOK REVIEW

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ETHEL BENJAMIN NEW ZEALAND'S FIRST WOMAN LAWYER by Janet November (Author), Victoria University Press for The Law Foundation, 2009. Recommended retail price \$54.99.

This biography of Ethel Benjamin is very aptly titled. From the first page the reader is transported to Dunedin in the nineteenth century to walk in the footsteps of Ethel Benjamin beginning with 1875, the year of her birth. Throughout the book the author paints a vivid picture of Dunedin and Otago during the latter half of the nineteenth century and it is against this backdrop that she draws in the picture of the girl who was destined to break social barriers and become New Zealand's first woman lawyer.

Until I read this book my impressions of Dunedin had been formed by my own memories of the 1970s, living at the top of one of the steepest hills in the world, fighting the biting wind and building coal fires hot enough to melt the snow on the roof. Now, when I think of Dunedin, I have in mind the bustling, growing city where Ethel Benjamin went to school and later to university and where she broke through the male bastion of legal practice and went on to set up her own law firm. Janet November conveys to the readers the problems of a city in its early days, of the strain put on inadequate sewerage systems, of horse-drawn trams struggling to navigate dirt roads that were dust heaps in summer and muddy quagmires in winter. She describes Ethel's early life so well that one can imagine Ethel as a girl going off to school, doing her homework, and visiting family and friends. Ethel's mother is clearly seen in the background with her large brood of children, carrying on the day to day life of a matriarch in a prosperous family.

Janet November has taken the facts that she has about Ethel and her family and carefully woven them into the larger story of the rapid development of the city of Dunedin during the exciting time of expansion and growth after the goldrush of the 1860s. The University of Otago had been established four years before Ethel's birth but at that time university education for women was unheard of. Women were entering certain professions in the 1860s but were restricted to being teachers and nurses or else setting up in business as milliners, dressmakers and suchlike. One huge stride forward was taken when the Otago Girls' High School was established in 1871. This achievement was the result of the vigorous advocacy of Miss Dalrymple who was supported by influential men. At that time, however, the aim was to produce intelligent wives rather than candidates for professions like law and medicine. Ethel began her studies at the Girls' High School when she was eight years old and thus began on her extraordinary path.

One common theme in Janet November's narrative is the way that Ethel Benjamin's achievements were supported and even made possible by the efforts of influential people, many of them men, who were prominent in Otago society at the time. For example Sir John Richardson and Robert Stout who stood by Miss Dalrymple in her efforts to secure education for women. I could not help but compare Ethel Benjamin's situation with the plight of women in England. Admission for women to Oxford University was opened up in 1878 with the establishment of female-only academic halls, but women were not entitled to be awarded University degrees until 1920. For Ethel at university, the attainment of the degree was not easy. Teaching was minimal and students had to study largely by themselves, also the male students were not all wholly in favour of the

admission of females, especially as the first two female law students proved to be so much better at passing the examinations than the males.

Ethel Benjamin's story is well told but I was left wanting to know more about Ethel herself. In the Foreword by Dorothy Page it is acknowledged that there was scant material available to give us much in the way of personal commentary. We have some letters and a few snippets, for example from an interview in 1897 when she referred to her early decision to become a lawyer and described the support she gained from her parents for the venture. These comments in no way suggest recognition of any difficulties that might be put in her way, despite the fact that an Act of Parliament would have to be passed before she could be allowed to practise law. However from her later dealings with the Otago District Law Society we can see that she was fiercely determined to be accepted as a full member of the legal profession and enjoy every aspect of her status, not relegated to some second rank of women lawyers. It may be that Ethel understated her awareness of the significance of her decision to be a lawyer. On the other hand she may have detected that the circumstances at that time were in her favour and have taken advantage of them. We simply cannot tell. Ethel married and eventually went to England in about 1910. It would appear that she intended to stay for a visit but World War I changed their plans and she and her husband settled in England, Ethel becoming England's first woman to hold a bank manager's position. Her success at being admitted to legal practice in New Zealand in 1897 was a factor used by the English suffragette's to campaign for the right of women in England to enter legal practice, but there is no evidence of Ethel taking any active role in that campaign.

I enjoyed Janet November's account of Ethel Benjamin very much. It is well written and obviously the product of careful research. The achievement of Ethel Benjamin was considerable, there is no doubt, but I now want to know more about the people who contributed to her achievement and to explore why attitudes towards the education and emancipation of women were so enlightened in Dunedin at that time compared to England. Above all the book has given me a different view of Dunedin and next time I am there I shall look for the landmarks that Ethel Benjamin would have known.

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