

A life of long labour

ANDERTON: HIS LIFE AND TIMES

David Grant

Te Herenga Waka University Press

By MIKE HOULAHAN

This compelling biography of Jim Anderton is a big book, as befits a subject who liked to talk . . . a lot.

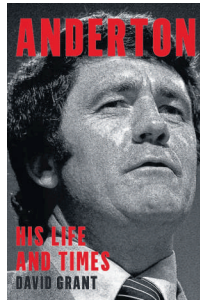
The former Labour president and backbench MP, and former Alliance and Progressives leader, was a gifted but also an inexhaustible conversationalist.

Once, when working for *The Press*, I was summoned to his Sydenham home “for a chin-wag” and only returned three hours later, after the batteries in the recorder had long since expired.

David Grant has a track record of chronicling working-class heroes, having already taken on former Labour PM Norm Kirk and, in fascinating fashion, former CTU president Ken Douglas.

In terms of the sheer amount of material available on Mr Anderton, both in the public domain and within his extensive personal papers, one suspects Grant had something of an Everest to climb.

Happily, he has not been overwhelmed by his task and a true warts-and-all portrait emerges of a man still often beset by self doubt despite his successes as a politician and an athlete, of a man who sacrificed his family for his career and may never have forgiven himself for that choice, and of a driven workaholic who still made time to go to the pictures every Friday night; but who also vanished from family holidays



without any announcement so as to complete some unfinished business.

Mr Anderton was a man who cared, who perhaps cared too much. Grant does not gloss over the fact that it was often Mr Anderton's way or the highway as he sought to achieve what he thought was right.

But for all the bitter break-ups and squabbles, Grant still captures the charisma which captivated political aspirants of many stripes, and the man's wry sense of humour.

As much as it is biography, *Anderton* is also a potted history of the shifting sands of New Zealand politics during the past 40 years, as its subject moved from tribal Labour, to condemnation of the party he always said left him rather than the other way around, and his final willingness to sit around a Cabinet table with several of the politicians he felt had compromised to devalue his ideals.

From chequered childhood to deputy Prime Minister, it was a hell of a ride, and it makes for a hell of a book.

Mike Houlahan is the Otago Daily Times political reporter



BUSHLINE

Robbie Burton

Potter & Burton

By DAVID BARNES

After 30 years helming a successful publishing house, Robbie Burton knows what a great book looks like. It turns out he also knows how to write one. Growing up in Nelson with little memory of his father, who died when the author — his fifth child — was 3, Burton initially conceived a book that would ensure that his own sons could know something of their father's younger days. An early version was produced for friends and family, some of whom encouraged him to expand it and publish it commercially, with more emphasis on his career.

Formative experiences, including a family holiday that took in the mountains of Fiordland and Mt Cook National Parks, an uncle who shouted him a ski week, and an introduction to tramping from his school's camp on the edge of Nelson Lakes National Park, engendered a lifelong love of the outdoors. (The school camps are the only positive note in an otherwise blistering assessment of his time at Nelson College). After dropping out of university, he spent time as a ski bum here and in North America before working for Native Forest Action Council in its fight to halt logging. After a period establishing a career in community arts management, his



Robbie Burton with stoat traps on top of Long Island, Tamatea, Dusky Sound.

PHOTO: BUSHLINE

friend Craig Potton asked him to manage his nascent publishing house. A very steep learning curve ensued, with a self-described fair bit of making it up as he went, combined with a large dose of impostor syndrome.

While much of the publishing has focused on the natural world, from Potton's photography to award-winning books on tramping and natural history, one significant strand has been the work of political activist Nicky Hager, who Burton knew from his forest campaigning days. The commercial success of Hager's first book *Secret Power*, which first announced the Five Eyes spy network to a wider world, was unexpected. The secrecy and speed needed to get these books into shops without running up against injunctions and publicity counter-offensives from the authorities meant that publishing them was not just a routine time in the office.

I am not sure that a book about publishing would normally interest me — although tramping, which I am passionate about, is another major strand — but this book drew me in. The chapter on the whirlwind romance with his now wife is delightful, while the necessary depiction of the end of his previous relationship poignantly describes the turmoil and anguish he felt.

Perhaps the icing on the cake was the concluding chapter, where Burton eloquently describes the deep sense of connection with both the mountainous regions of Te Wai Pounamu and with his home town, and why he has largely remained close to both throughout his life.

This was a thoroughly enjoyable read, and hopefully the author has another book in him.

David Barnes lives in Lower Hutt and is an avid trumper and armchair mountaineer



Confronting the knowledge of certain death

THE COLLECTIONS

Patricia Donovan

Mary Egan Publishing

By CUSHLA MCKINNEY

Most of us deal with the fear of death by considering it in the abstract, as something that will happen to us one day but nothing to worry about now. But what would it be like to live with the knowledge of exactly when that day will arrive?

The Collections, by Christchurch-born Patricia Donovan, is set in a near-future where, in the face of uncontrollable climate change and a global population pushing 10 billion, people are required to sacrifice themselves for the planet after their biblical three score years and 10.



Claris Millar is one of many who accepts the law with equanimity, recognising that “humanity needed a rescue remedy and fast, and if there was an alternative . . . no one had yet come up with it”. She even works at a crematorium where state-mandated euthanasia — Collection — is carried out.

But after watching her husband calmly driven off to his death, Claris realises that she is not ready to follow him

and starts planning her escape.

The story is presented as memoir, a technique that distances the reader slightly from the action and allows her to explore her own ambivalence.

The details of the Collection process are horrifying (“clients” are sedated, euthanised with a similar cocktail of drugs as that used to execute prisoners, mulched in an industrial blender, and “gifted” to a seedling tree), but Claris' practical, matter-of-fact description perfectly illustrates the way that we, as a society, find ways to accommodate all manner of unpleasant truths.

She does not deny her complicity, nor does she condemn the practice per say,

... delivered with dark humour and an acknowledgement of moral complexity

but comes to recognise the ethical arguments in favour of euthanasia — the right to choose the time and manner of one's own death — also constrain it.

It is an important message, but one that is delivered with dark humour and an acknowledgement of moral complexity. Meanwhile, Claris is a perfect example of why we should never underestimate the older generation.

Cushla McKinney is a Dunedin scientist