

Fairness and Freedom Review

By DAVID COHEN | Published on May 11, 2012

The US and us - two “open societies” yet based on markedly different values. This rewarding work of popular historical scholarship explains why.

In 1934, shortly before he quit these shores for England, George Bernard Shaw startled a Wellington reporter who had asked about his impressions of his time here in the South Seas. “If I showed my true feelings I would cry,” the famously prickly playwright admitted. “It’s the best country I have been in.”

Sixty years on, American historian David Hackett Fischer, a professor at Brandeis University, experienced a similar feeling upon encountering New Zealand for the first time in 1994. But instead of simply being teary-eyed by the encounter, he has gone on to produce a rewarding work of popular historical scholarship about it.

It may be that readers are tiring of the kind of historical studies about our country that publishers have clambered over each other in recent years to produce. Possibly this is even more the case in respect of works produced by foreign authors hailing from faculty lounges, a lark that probably began in 1948 with Australian historian FLW Wood’s *This New Zealand*.

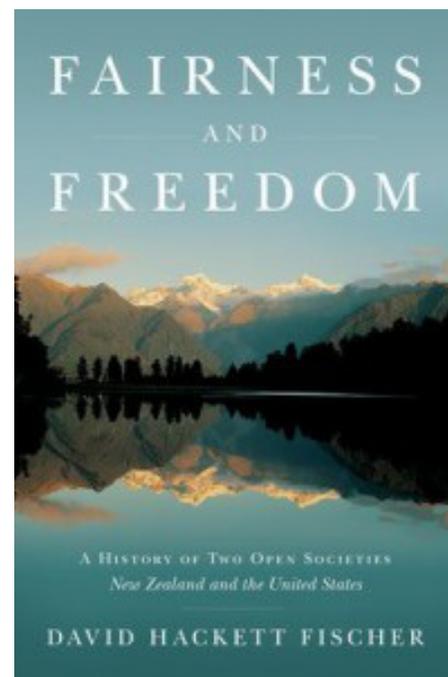
What partly distinguishes *Fairness and Freedom*, a 493-page study that revs into life after citing the earlier exchange involving Shaw, is that it is as much in the relatively new field of political theory as actual history.

Fischer meditates long on the question of foundational values. The American settlers, he posits, were primarily concerned with escaping harassment,

hence the stateside enthusiasm for counting liberty before all other political values; the early antipodeans, on the other hand, were more interested in ducking the class systems of the old world, and so plumped for egalitarianism – or “fairness” – as a guiding virtue, not least in political arrangements.

How this plays out with the native Maori is never made entirely clear. Nevertheless, Fischer convincingly spins the theme out for all it’s worth, drawing on an array of scholarship and anecdotes to make his case. Taking the ideological wars of the early 1980s, for one, he shows how both the prime minister Rob Muldoon and economic challenger Roger Douglas felt culturally obliged to dress their pitches in near-identical language.

Muldoon’s conservatively interventionist policies were



justified by an appeal to fairness, which had “broad appeal in New Zealand and became the motto of Muldoon’s enthusiastic supporters, who called themselves ‘Rob’s Mob.’” Actually, it was Muldoon who coined that moniker, but even so, as Fischer points out, such a pitch is foreign to American political speech. On the other side of the coin, Douglas was diametrically opposed to Muldoonism. Yet he

also argued – in, for example, his book *Unfinished Business* – that radical economic liberalisation would deliver a “fair outcome”; indeed, a key chapter in the work was titled “Security and Fairness”. Both men thereby appealed to notions of fairness, “much as American leaders of the left, right and centre all claim to be the true friends of liberty and freedom”.

Introducing all this is a sweetly observed account of the author’s first road trip through New Zealand that wouldn’t be out of place as a feature in the *New Yorker*. Or at least it wouldn’t be were it not for his slightly irritating habit of always majestically referring to himself here and elsewhere in the royal “we”.

Surprisingly, despite the subtitle’s allusion to Karl Popper, Fischer doesn’t dwell on the famous Austrian émigré as much as one might expect. Popper popularised the term “open society” in a very famous book he wrote while in New Zealand, so why not explain the significance of his idea a bit more here? Then again, perhaps, Popper was concerned mostly with freedom’s enemies in Europe, whereas Fischer is far more interested in its friends both in his own American homeland and this strikingly different yet oddly similar place we call New Zealand. But he’s at liberty to do that. It’s only fair.

FAIRNESS AND FREEDOM: A HISTORY OF TWO OPEN SOCIETIES – NEW ZEALAND AND THE UNITED STATES, by David Hackett Fischer (Oxford, \$56.99).

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