Book review

ETTIE ROUT: NEW ZEALAND’S SAFER SEX PIONEER
Jane Tolerton
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Jane Tolerton’s revised and updated biography, *Ettie Rout: New Zealand’s safer sex pioneer* (2015), traces the adult life of the campaigner best known for her work reducing New Zealand soldiers’ exposure to venereal disease (VD) during World War I (WWI). Rout’s ideas on abortion, contraception, VD, marriage, and sex were out of step with the prevailing views of her time, leading her to claim she was ‘born too soon’. Although her childhood and early working life in New Zealand are covered, the book’s main focus is on Rout’s work in Egypt, England, and France, during and after the war. It was during this time she created and promoted the VD kits, despite much public and official opposition – kits that were eventually adopted by the New Zealand military for standard and compulsory issue. Initially her ‘outsider’ position as a civilian allowed her to ask questions of the military without reprimand, but she later gained official influence when her medical approach to reducing VD rates won out against the military’s previously favoured ‘fear of consequences’ moral approach (pp. 124–6).

The main argument and the motivation behind Tolerton’s two Ettie Rout biographies (1992, 2015) is that Rout is an important yet overlooked figure in New Zealand’s historical narrative. An official wartime ban on writing about soldiers and VD meant her work was largely hidden from the New Zealand public and, under the same censorship, no official New Zealand war histories made reference to the tireless campaigner. She was briefly mentioned three times in Australia’s official war histories. Tolerton contrasts Rout’s invisibility with the recognition given to Australian volunteers Alice Chisholm and Rania McPhillamy, who received Orders of the British Empire (a DBE and an OBE, respectively). And while labelling Rout as the most ‘dramatic example’, Tolerton acknowledges that the wartime efforts of other New Zealand women – doctors, nurses, and ambulance drivers – were similarly absent from official histories (p. 151). Despite Rout’s omission from official histories, Tolerton stresses how soldiers remembered Rout and spoke of their admiration and respect for her in their interviews with Tolerton and Nicholas Boyack that form the World War I Oral History Archive. (This leads me to wonder whether soldiers’ views on other matters that challenged the dominant and accepted narrative were, likewise, not well represented in official histories of the war.) Tolerton has drawn on this archive for the revised biography, and the war veterans’ testimonies add a poignancy and freshness to the narrative that are a welcome addition.

One of the strengths of Tolerton’s writing is her ability to describe day-to-day aspects of the war that bring breadth to a reader’s sense of wartime experiences. Passing mention is made of a flat the Volunteer Sisterhood women shared in Cairo, of soldiers taking cooking
classes in Alexandria, of the ‘respectable’ entertainment provided in the canteens. I found the social welfare aspects of Rout’s war work as fascinating as her sexual welfare work; the early soldiers’ canteens she set up in Egypt, and then the rooms she hired and ran for two years at a Paris motel to provide New Zealand soldiers on leave with a place to rest, to be advised about safer sex, and to receive advice about other matters (such as military leave). Tolerton also captures the real impact VD had on returning soldiers in an age before penicillin – monthly appointments for two years for syphilis patients; weekly urethral irrigation for up to one year for gonorrhoea sufferers (p. 170). Tolerton consulted an array of primary sources (archival, oral history, official, and ephemeral), and these lend both information and vibrancy to the book. Well-placed excerpts from correspondence with friends and admirers demonstrate Rout’s opinionated approach and wry sense of humour. These details allow the reader to build up a real sense of the context and of Rout’s character.

Historical biographies – previously dismissed by academics as not making a serious contribution to history – are a special kind of history writing. Once the classic vehicle to celebrate ‘great men’ in history, the genre has shifted to become a way of highlighting the everydayness of an historical period through the life of an individual and their interaction with their times and society. The question of whether a biography can move from just being an interesting story of one individual to illuminating something of the broader historical meaning is the challenge historical biographers must face. In discussing the nature of biography, historian Jonathan Steinberg (2011) writes about his desire to capture his subject as a real person, working within ‘real parameters’. There must be a balance between the person as a remarkable individual, but one positioned within their context – cultural, historical, and social. Tolerton achieves this most successfully in Chapter 10, which outlines Rout’s post-war life. In this section, Tolerton situates Rout’s individual journey, beliefs, and actions within the broader social and technological shifts occurring at this time. This chapter captures Rout as that ‘real person’ working within ‘real parameters’.

History writing reflects something of the needs and interests of the historian’s own context. Publication of Tolerton’s 1992 biography, Ettie: A life of Ettie Rout, coincided with the centenary celebrations of women’s suffrage in New Zealand the following year. The book, which Tolerton had spent the previous decade researching, timed perfectly with a public desirous to hear stories of strong, interesting and influential New Zealand women in history. The revised biography was published in 2015 as part of the centennial commemoration of the First World War. This is part of a renewed interest in WWI history and a desire to tell war stories from new perspectives. (The New Zealand Portrait Gallery, for example, included Ettie Rout as well as nursing pioneer Hester Maclean, civilians, and conscientious objectors in their centenary commemorations.) Tolerton’s other recent project, the bestselling An awfully big adventure (2013), likewise offers new perspectives of WWI through the oral histories of veterans. The timing and content of both books have met a public need and contributed to the construction of national memory narratives.

Tolerton’s stated intention in revising her original biography was to create ‘a shorter, more accessible version’ (p. 1). This new version of the book reveals some reordering of the material, less detail overall, and a substantial reduction in coverage of Rout’s childhood and life before the war. In the final chapter, Tolerton expresses her frustration at the way authors and documentarians used her first biography to reduce Rout to ‘a comic figure’ who handed out condoms and inspected brothels (p. 228). Tolerton’s hope is that the shorter book might help bring the nuances and complexities back to Rout’s story for the general reader. Unfortunately, historical research on sex and sexuality is often presented to the public in salacious or reductive terms. Rout did achieve more than her work for soldiers’ sexual welfare. The book clearly
shows the important social welfare Rout provided for soldiers. However, even Tolerton herself uses the better-known work on VD as a publishing hook, with the subtitle *Safer sex pioneer*. In the end, it is Rout’s wartime VD work that grabs the reader’s attention and that poses the initial challenge to the twenty-first-century reader’s perceptions of early twentieth-century women. Here was an unmarried woman talking about sex and seemingly advocating ‘vice’ by promoting chemical and physical prophylaxis. On many topics, Rout stood in opposition to her better-known contemporaries – the social purity feminists, such as Kate Sheppard – illustrating the tensions and diversity amongst a group often presented as homogenous. Rout reminds us of the potential complexity in any historical time period – that our assumptions of the past are often challenged when an individual who did not fit the mould is examined in more detail than just a passing stereotype.

While many readers will be happy with this more accessible version, problems remain for an academic reader. The book would have been strengthened by some discussion on Tolerton’s role as a biographer – her subjectivity within the researching and writing process – and some reflection on the use of partisan sources, such as Rout’s authored propaganda vehicle, *Two years in Paris* (1923). Without such methodological discussions, the work is presented as if it is an objective account of a life. There is also no interaction with recent historiography nor any in-depth consideration of theoretical arguments around women’s history, nation building, or memory making. As with the limited referencing, these issues reduce the book’s appeal for an academic audience.

Those interested in historical non-fiction will find a lot to like in this account of Rout’s fascinating life. Alongside the main story, there is something here for those interested in the histories of New Zealand journalism, labour and socialist movements, physical culture, feminism and the women’s movement, sex education, nutrition and dietary advice, and volunteerism. If this biography brings Rout’s work to a wider audience then I think she, the tireless campaigner and self-promoter, would approve.

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**References**


