Diana Brown. *The Unconventional Career of Dr Muriel Bell.* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2018). ISBN: 978-1-98-853130-4 (PB). 184pp.

This is the first book length biography of Dr Muriel Bell, who among other things, was New Zealand’s first state nutritionist from 1940 until 1964. Over her long career as a scientist, Dr Bell influenced the lives of most mid-century New Zealanders with her campaign for milk in schools along with her support of iodised salt and fluoridated water. Bell studied medicine at the University of Otago and was the second woman to be awarded the degree of Doctor of Medicine in New Zealand.

The biography very much focuses on Bell’s career and professional life as there are relatively few details of her personal life in the historical record although we do know that she was married twice and both her husbands were considerably older than her. She never had children, and both her husbands primarily ran the household while Bell was dedicated to her career. In particular, it is frustrating that not more could be found about the work of her first husband, Jim Saunders who was an active socialist, and spent his time in Europe during the 1930s being involved in supporting pacifist and possibly communist activities.

As the title suggests Bell’s career was unconventional in that she was a woman, but at the same time, the trajectory of her career was not uncommon for many of New Zealand’s doctors and scientists during the majority of the twentieth century. She spent time in the 1930s studying and working in the United Kingdom, and continued to travel internationally during her career spending time at Harvard and elsewhere in the United States in the 1950s.

Bell saw first-hand the impact of poor nutrition on the population of Britain during the Depression and rather patriotically lamented the fact that grocers were selling margarine rather than New Zealand butter at a time when New Zealand farmers were unable to sell their butter.

While primarily focused on human nutrition, Bell also spent time trying to solve the issue of illness in sheep. She diagnosed a cobalt deficiency in sheep in Southland.

Bell and Jim Saunders had a close friendship with Peter Fraser and that combined with her exceptional work in the field of nutrition made her an ideal candidate for the role of state nutritionist which was created as part of Labour’s emphasis on public health. It seems also that Fraser had encouraged Bell to return to New Zealand from the United Kingdom in 1935 and that without his encouragement she may have remained in the UK to further her career there.

One of Bell’s main interests, not surprisingly given her role as state nutritionist, was the quality of food consumed by New Zealanders. Bell believed that New Zealanders ate too much meat and sugar and authored a number of pamphlets encouraging New Zealanders to improve their diets and not too eat too many cakes and scones at morning and afternoon tea.

New Zealand also had a high rate of tooth decay compared to other countries, which led to Bell’s campaign to fluoridate New Zealand’s drinking water. This proved a difficult issue to promote, but by the mid-1960s most New Zealand communities had fluoridated water and Bell became the first person outside the dental profession to be made an honorary member of the New Zealand Dental Association.

One of the things that Brown does best is include interesting details about Bell’s life to illustrate her points without letting the story get bogged down in so much detail that the reader loses the main thread. For example, when discussing Bell’s particular interest in the health of women and children, Brown gives the example of Bell being concerned by pregnant and breastfeeding women giving their rations to the other members of their family.

She also mentions that Bell advised Edmund Hillary and his team of sled dogs on their nutritional needs for the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition which took placed between 1955 and 1958.

The work is well footnoted and there is a useful index, but it would have also been helpful had a bibliography been included.

This is a fascinating read, and will be of interest to historians of public health, social history of medicine as well as those with an interest in women, education and the public service in New Zealand. As it is a very accessible biography it will also be of interest to the general public.

HAYLEY BROWN

LONDON SCHOOL OF HYGIENE AND TROPICAL MEDICINE

BRIEF BIO:

Hayley Brown is a research fellow in history at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. She is currently working on a history of the NZ and UK health systems from c.1938 until 2000. She received her PhD on the history of divorce in New Zealand from Victoria University of Wellington in 2011.