I must admit that I came to this book with the suspicion that it would add very little to a well-researched aspect of New Zealand history. W. David McIntyre, Ann Trotter, and Malcolm McKinnon have covered the diplomatic history of the interwar period in various publications.[1] Similarly, Ian C. McGibbon has also studied New Zealand’s military preparedness prior to World War II, or rather lack of it, in several studies.[2] Then there are many biographies of leading politicians, including Michael Joseph Savage, Peter Fraser, Walter Nash, and John A. Lee on the “left”; Joseph Ward in the middle; and Gordon Coates on the “right” that traverse this same ground.[3] A couple of doctoral theses have also examined New Zealand’s role at the Versailles conference, including the contributions of Ward and William Ferguson Massey, and its involvement in the Spanish Civil War.[4] In addition, there are several autobiographies written by such key players as the two main architects of New Zealand’s foreign policy—Carl Berendsen and Alister McIntosh.[5] In short, it is hard to think of any part of New Zealand history that has a richer archive, or that has been so thoroughly examined by both thesis students and experienced historians. Yet, by focusing on New Zealand and the League of Nations rather than relations with one country, or some single aspect of New Zealand’s emerging foreign policy, Gerald Chaudron’s scholarly and balanced study manages to add something new.

Through his careful examination of a large and sometimes complex archive, Chaudron nuances the standard view that New Zealand had no foreign policy to speak of before 1935 because it left such matters up to the British government. In fact, the author shows that even Massey and Coates realized that membership in the league provided another avenue to exert its influence outside the empire. Working with the league had its uses in securing cheap phosphate from Nauru and Ocean Island and in winning the mandate over Western Samoa. These two ardent imperialists used the league to promote and protect New Zealand’s interests, particularly when those interests differed from those of Britain. The break when Labour took over the reins of government in 1935 was not, therefore, quite as radical as popular orthodoxy has it. Continuities as well as change marked Labour’s efforts to pursue a more independent line from Britain as they deigned to criticize Britain’s soft treatment of Benito Mussolini and the Japanese. Foreign policy also assumed a higher priority under Labour, but not as high a priority as historians sympathetic to Labour have suggested. Chaudron shows that attachment to Britain still remained strong and there was never any argument that New Zealand would support Britain against aggressive European or Asian powers.

Chaudron also succeeds in highlighting the long-forgotten contribution made by the three high commissioners who worked with the league after James Allen: James Parr on behalf of the Reform government, Thomas Wilford on behalf of the coalition government, and William Jordan on behalf of Labour. Most New Zealand historians know quite a lot about Allen, who ran the country for much of the First World War while Massey and Ward were overseas, but Parr, Wilford, and Jordan have remained rather shadowy figures in comparison. Thanks to Chaudron’s labors we now know that all three were men of strong views and high energy who ensured that New Zealand made a contribution to the work of the league out of all proportion to its size. Chau-
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