

NZ NON-FICTION

# Lifting the lid

Books about TV's favourite funeral directors, a war hero who became a priest, and a flax dynasty.



by CHRISTOPHER MOORE

Dismissing *Life as a Casketeer: What the Business of Death Can Teach the Living* (HarperCollins, \$39.99) as a mere spin-off would be unkind. While bobbing happily in the wake of the extraordinarily successful television series *The Casketeers*, the book develops its own personality.

It's perhaps a mark of these uncertain times when a television reality series about the life and work of an Auckland funeral director attracts a cult following. *The Casketeers'* success was largely due to the personalities involved. Francis Tipene's idiosyncratic but enthusiastic bustle is matched by the warmth, dignity and compassion he brings to a challenging job. Supported by his wife, Kaiora, and whānau, Tipene casts a beam of Polynesian sunlight on to how we confront dying. The book becomes a revealing study of Māori and Pacific attitudes to death and mourning. Pākehā funerals, it suggests, can be highly structured, somewhat detached events, whereas Māori tangihanga embraces the

living and the dead in a flow of spirituality that goes well beyond the grave.

Before his death in 1987, Sir Edward Norman was a much-loved and respected Bishop of Wellington – an Anglican priest who brought humanity and inspiration to his vocation. In her highly readable biography, **Eddie**

**Norman and 25 Battalion**

(The Cuba Press, \$40), his daughter, Elizabeth Kay, recounts her father's military career during World War II. The 22-year-old theological student volunteered for the army in 1939. By 1942, he was a platoon commander at El Alamein. In 1944, he was commanding the 25th Battalion during the bloody Italian campaign. War histories are notoriously difficult

books to write, but Kay acquits herself with distinction, drawing out the human face of the conflict without becoming mired in statistical detail. I have reservations about biographies written by close family members, but her book paints a vivid word portrait of a young New Zealander caught up in a brutal war.

Francis and Kaiora Tipene: casting sunlight on how we confront dying.

By its final chapter, I also appreciated why his fellow soldiers regarded Norman MC, DSO, Legion of Merit with such enduring affection. Here's a book for both the military enthusiast and the general reader, one written from the heart but with the eye of a historian.

Ray Caird's **Blood of the Flax** (Kete Media, \$45) proved to be an absolute delight: a colourful, affectionate and informed study of one family, two cultures and an ancient species of plant. Harakeke, New Zealand flax, has had a defining effect on both Māori and many Pākehā. When the first members of the Caird family arrived in Victorian-era Otago, Māori had been processing and weaving harakeke for centuries. New Zealand flax had provided rope for the British navy, laying the foundations for an industry that engaged many New Zealanders, including several generations of Cairds, in an uncertain and often hazardous business. Caird's uncluttered text is complemented by his handsome photographs and images garnered from the family archives. Flax is embedded in his whānau's DNA, and from Granny Grace – Scottish flax weaver and spinner and, when she died in 1937 aged 107, Scotland's oldest woman – to John Caird, Kaitangata flax-mill owner and local worthy, this is a potent family saga. ■

