



Act MP Deborah Coddington and PM Helen Clark are sworn in, after the 2002 general election, as Green MP Sue Bradford and Bill English look on.

# DEBORAH CODDINGTON

She's been labelled hard-right and hard-nosed – but pretty much every label applied to Deborah Coddington is wrong. She talks candidly to Sarah Lang.

**A** hard-nosed, right-wing bitch. Deborah Coddington is used to this caricature of her – and used to the long shadow cast by her stint as an Act MP (2002-2005). But at 62 and more content than ever before, she's not too worried about what people think. And it's easy to forget that politics was just one of many chapters in her life – or what she calls lots of lives. Once, she was a child of a violent marriage, a hippie who organised protest marches, a mother of four young children, a restaurateur, a writer for this magazine, and most recently a Sunday-newspaper columnist.

Now she's come full circle, back to the farming life she led as a child and a young mother – and back to Martinborough, the town she left in disgrace when former partner Alister Taylor went bankrupt. Here, for the past 10 years, she and Queen's Counsel husband Colin Carruthers have grown a successful vineyard and winery, Redbank. Shadowed by her beloved

dogs, collecting eggs and growing vegetables, she's found country life has rubbed off her sharp edges – and she found time to write her first book, *The Good Life on Te Muna Road* (Penguin Random House, \$39.99).

From the title, it's tempting to dismiss this as the folly of an affluent lady of the vines, picking grapes when the fancy takes her and dashing off a few words between sips of viognier. But this book is no *A Year in Provence* – and not just because life at Redbank is bloody hard work. It's partly a portrait of Martinborough life, characters and history, capturing the spirit of heartland New Zealand. And it's also a memoir. Coddington writes with searing honesty about everything from her abortion aged 16 and her guilt about Taylor's bankruptcy through to the elderly mother who made her life hell. From between the lines emerges a woman who is frank, funny and flawed, but never what you expect.

**North & South:** I enjoyed the book much more than I expected to, given that title.

**Deborah Coddington:** It's from a Frank Sinatra song that goes, "The good life lets you hide all the sadness you feel." I wanted that whole line for the title, but getting copyright was taking too long.

**N&S:** You say you wrote the book to record the life, characters and generous spirit of Martinborough. Was that always the plan?

**DC:** No. I was asked to write a *Year in Provence*-type book. And as I started writing, I was thinking about the people who lived near me, how special they all were, and how I was taking them for granted a bit. This is Martinborough through my lens. It took five years; my first drafts were crap. But once I found my voice, it just fell out of me. It grew organically.

**N&S:** And it also grew into a memoir – did the book demand that of you?

**DC:** Yes. I didn't want it to be a memoir, but someone told me people won't want to read it unless I've put myself in. But I only wrote about my past where it was relevant.

**N&S:** Why make your mother and your difficult relationship such a big part of the book?

**DC:** Because a lot of Martinborough people knew her, and because she was such a huge part of my life when she moved there. I had to pretty much stop doing journalism because it was almost a full-time job looking after her. She nearly drove me mad. And she told me she wanted me to write her life story. She probably didn't want me to write some of what I did, but it is an honest book.

**N&S:** You've been extremely honest about things you could have left out, such as the abortion you had at 16. Did you struggle with what to include?

**DC:** I struggled with writing about it [the abortion]. I included it to explain how my mother was a woman of such contrasts. She was a very conservative, prudish woman, so for Mum to sell some jewellery



Deborah Coddington between the vines in Martinborough.





Left: Deborah Coddington on horseback in the Huangarua River. Above: With daughter Briar and piglets at Puruatanga, 1976.



JANE USSHER



Left: Colin Carruthers “CCQC” and Coddington with Whetu at Redbank’s front door. Above: Winston, the vainglorious rooster, with his wives.

and take me to Sydney for an illegal abortion was very brave, when we lived in central Hawke’s Bay. People were very class-conscious, and we had a Roman Catholic GP, so if that information had got out, she knew what people would think.

**N&S:** Is this the first time you’ve talked about the abortion publicly?

**DC:** Yes, and it’s still hard for me to talk about. It was in the draft and my children didn’t know, and when I told them they said, “Is that all?” I still don’t know what the effect will be in my neighbourhood. But the truth sets you free in the end. I also wanted women to know an abortion doesn’t have to be the end of the world. You can move on.

**N&S:** You also write about having three miscarriages at 20 weeks’ pregnancy, while living at the historic house Waiura, where terrible things had happened. Do you really wonder if it was cursed?

**DC:** I’ve always wondered that. I don’t know. I don’t think so, because I think people make their own choices. The miscarriages

were mysteries. I had to have them induced and delivered. It was awful.

**N&S:** You include some very personal things about Colin’s life, especially his meeting his daughter who was adopted out, and the suicide of his son. Did you ask Colin’s permission?

**DC:** He’s a very private person who doesn’t talk to the media, and I’ve dragged him into this. I didn’t ask his permission. But he’s very supportive – he thinks the book is great.

**N&S:** You’re also very open about Alister’s bankruptcy and unpaid bills. Did you include that because you were “tarred and feathered out of town” in the early 80s, but 25 years later you were embraced by the community?

**DC:** Yes. I was nervous when I moved back and slunk around town for a bit. I thought people would shun me. I couldn’t believe it when people were so welcoming. They moved on and took me as I am now.

**N&S:** Do you still feel that shame and regret?

**DC:** Yes. I still feel terrible that people I knew were going to the letterbox for cheques that never came. If I could turn back the clock I would, but I can’t. I was very defensive at the time, but we deserved all the scorn we got. I should have seen it coming, and should never have lived such a lavish life. It was singularly insensitive and outrageous. I can never make amends for it, and if people who were never paid choose to hate me, they have every right. I just have to suck it up.

**N&S:** You’re very poised, so I was surprised to read that you had an inferiority complex as a young woman.

**DC:** I had a huge inferiority complex and I really regret it. Because you make huge mistakes when you have low self-worth. I grew up with my parents constantly yelling, shouting and hitting each other. That brings up children with very low self-esteem who don’t feel safe in the world. I was lucky I had a good education and was well-fed and loved, so I could overcome those things. Some children can’t and come to grief.

**N&S:** When you’re open about so much, why skim over politics?

**DC:** I was bored by thinking about my life in politics, so I thought the reader would be bored too.

**N&S:** How have your political views changed since you left Parliament?

**DC:** They’ve softened. I have a smorgasbord approach now from all along the political spectrum. I think it happened being back on the land and having all that thinking time – and being happy. I was once so unhappy, angry and lonely I channelled that into being a hard-arsed journalist. Now I look at everything from different angles, and really listen to what people think.

**N&S:** You lunch once a month with Katherine Rich and Sue Kedgley, and say you’re morphing from an Act MP into a greenie. Is that a joke or is really true?

**DC:** Well, the Greens are the only party that does anything about animal welfare. And their \$1000-Kiwisaver-for-every-child policy was originally a Roger Douglas policy.

**N&S:** Did you really quit politics to protect your marriage?

**DC:** I’m not saying politics affects everybody’s marriage, but it was more about having time to do things together, like travel.

**N&S:** You went from “crashing through life” as an MP to consciously choosing a change of pace and place. But the romantic dream of picking grapes and baking bread soon dissolved?

**DC:** Yeah, there’s nothing glamorous about it. It’s really just farming. Your shoulders ache from the picking and pruning. Colin commutes to Wellington so I’m on my own a lot – but I love the isolation.

**N&S:** You’re involved in community projects too. Are you ever going to put your feet up or is that just not you?

**DC:** The only thing I can’t not do is write. The book satisfied that.

**N&S:** Is that why you wrote Sunday newspaper columns for years?

**DC:** I don’t have a column anymore. I don’t like manufacturing outrage.

I think I got sacked [from the *Sunday Star-Times*] because I got too wussy. I got replaced by Judith Collins.

**N&S:** Ouch. But you do plenty of complaining in the book’s first chapter: the road isn’t tarsealed the whole way, NZ Post doesn’t deliver to you, sheep and tractors hold up the traffic, Meridian tried to spoil the view with a wind farm...

**DC:** I didn’t think of it as complaining. I was just being ironic, saying that it’s not the rural bliss you might expect. The book is for people who think, “I want your life. I’d love to move to the country.” Because a lot of people want to but never will.

**N&S:** So is it encouragement or a reality check?

**DC:** They can live the dream reading the book and then decide if it’s for them.

**N&S:** What might surprise readers about you?

**DC:** That I’m not a one-dimensional, Act-template person. And I hope they’ll see that people can change. Everyone can change. +