Reviews


BEFORE they went overseas for post-graduate study, Kerry Howe and Robin Fisher wrote ‘missionary’ theses at Auckland under the supervision of Judith Binney. That training in methodology and schooling in perspective has considerably influenced their later work; indeed it might well have been more influential, if one can judge by the works under review, than the experience of doctoral studies. Howe went to the School of Pacific Studies at Canberra where he wrote a thesis on the Loyalty Islands (reviewed in the previous issue of the Journal). Fisher went to the University of British Columbia. The book under review is his doctoral thesis.

Howe’s comparative survey of race relations in Australia and New Zealand can be described as a post-doctoral romp through the published studies on race relations in the two countries. But it is unique in that no one has previously attempted to review Australasian race relations on a comparative basis. Unfortunately the book is so brief — a mere 30,000 words — that it cannot be more than an introduction to the subject. Students will soon be forced to proceed beyond it to the monographs on which it is based. As Howe admits, there is little factual information or interpretative comment in the book that cannot be found elsewhere. Nevertheless the book provides a useful summary, comparison and contrast of race relations in Australia and New Zealand.

The main trouble with it arises from its very brevity, for Howe’s generalizations, frequently apt and succinct, very often need to be qualified. Howe’s main point is that the differences which have occurred in the pattern of race relations in the two countries are due to the different environments and the different responses to European colonization of the Aborigines and Maoris. One must admit the point, but I think Howe has made rather too much of the differences in Aboriginal and Maori responses. It is all too easy to fall back on Rowley’s quip that the Maori was respected as a warrior and the Aborigine despised as a rural pest who could easily be brushed aside by small commandos of armed horsemen. It seems, especially from the work of Henry Reynolds, that the Aborigines put up more concerted resistance — almost amounting to guerrilla warfare at times — than has usually been allowed. It must be of some significance that these despised fighters, who
never even had the benefit of the musket, picked off more Europeans on the
frontiers than the famed Maori warriors. Likewise, Howe has virtually ignored
the Aboriginal participation in the economy. It was nearly always significant
in the pastoral industry and, in the North, quite essential. Indeed one cannot
help wondering if it was not so much that the Aborigines failed to respond,
but that historians have failed to note their responses. Given the rate at which
Aborigines are now being written into Australian history, I think that the
blame has been with the historians.

No doubt Howe is right to emphasize the considerable gap that existed by
the end of the century in government policies in both countries and in the
respective situations of Aborigines and Maoris. No doubt a large gap still
exists; but it is, I think, one of degree rather than kind, for the long-term
effect of European colonization in both countries appears to have been the
creation of an indigenous proletariat. The Maori standard of living is
obviously higher than that of the Aborigines, but not vastly better. In the
second half of the twentieth century, then, it is the similarities, not the
contrasts, that have become significant, and not least with the Aboriginal and
Maori protests about their situation, a topic which Howe has unfortunately
ignored.

Fisher's study of Indian-European relations in British Columbia has all the
detail and scholarly apparatus that one would expect of a doctoral thesis; but
it is not short of perceptive generalization either. He traces in turn the
activities and impact of European navigators, maritime and land-based fur
traders, gold diggers and settlers, missionaries and officials. But Fisher is not
content with a catalogue of European initiatives and Indian responses; indeed
for the early part of the period Fisher often reverses the equation and looks
at Indian initiatives and European responses. The Indians, far from being the
naive victims of European exploitation, gave as good as they got in
fur-trading. They remained very much in control of their own society. It was
the Europeans, especially those involved in the land-based fur trade, who had
to change their ways; very often they 'went native' and took Indian wives. It
is all very reminiscent of the Pakeha-Maoris of pre-1840 New Zealand who
were subjected to what Harrison Wright called Maori domination.

There is much more in the book that is reminiscent of New Zealand. For
with the annexation of Vancouver Island in 1849 and of the mainland nine
years later, and with the influx of gold-diggers and settlers, so the Europeans
were able to call the tune and force radical changes on to the Indians and
their culture. The parallels with post-1840 New Zealand are readily apparent;
implicit, though seldom explicit, in nearly everything Fisher has to say. The
settlers of British Columbia behaved in much the same way as the New
Zealand colonists, and some of their attitudes to the Indians were strikingly
similar to contemporary Pakeha attitudes to the Maori. Some of the leading
characters in the British Columbia story have their counterparts in New
Zealand: in Sir James Douglas, successively governor of Vancouver Island and
British Columbia, we can see much of Sir George Grey; and in William
Duncan of the C.M.S. we can find another Henry Williams, with whom, of
course, Robin Fisher started off.

New Zealanders who know Fisher's academic antecedents may not find
much to surprise them in his book, but it seems to have taken Canada by
storm – he recently won the prestigious Sir John A. Macdonald prize for it.
Indian-European relations in Canada, like Aboriginal-European relations in Australia, have until recently been much neglected by historians.

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It is a truism among publishers that theses are not books, and that publishers do not publish theses — only books. Many a thesis writer knows the shock of having a manuscript that impressed an examiner, and earned a degree, rejected by a publisher or returned with a demand for extensive re-writing. Nevertheless, it is also true that theses can be made into good books. Those under consideration are cases in point. Wetherell’s, in fact, draws on both a masters and a doctoral thesis. Both his and Ralston’s books derive from work done in the Pacific History department of the Australian National University. They are worthy additions to the now extensive volume of monographs from the same source by people who were given scholarships and guided by the late J.W. Davidson, foundation professor of the department. In their careful scholarship and island-centredness and in the personal interest of the authors in their subjects they reflect his influence.

Caroline Ralston’s book stems from her wish to follow up a line of enquiry discussed by H.E. Maude, Davidson’s chief lieutenant, in his well-known study of ‘Beachcombers and Castaways’. She is concerned to trace and compare the growth of European settler communities in the Pacific Islands. At one end of the time scale there were a few beachcombers, individuals who, to ensure their survival, had of necessity to come to terms with their island hosts. At the other, with the increase in European numbers, the ‘beach communities’, so-called from their location on the shoreline of the more frequented harbours, were turning into European-dominated urban centres, with little place for the islanders. The communities discussed here are those that developed at Honolulu, Levuka, Apia, Papeete and Kororareka. Although they were widely separated and developed at different times and rates the character and growth pattern of these settlements were markedly similar. They shared, for instance, common features such as the difficulty of maintaining law and order, the boredom and tension endemic in small foreign enclaves, and the steady deterioration of the Europeans’ relations with the native inhabitants.

Although much of Dr Ralston’s material is not new and she has drawn heavily on published sources, her book is a useful contribution to Pacific scholarship. For in making clear the links and similarities between the beach communities she has provided a synthesis, pan-Pacific in its scope, which