

Reviews

New Zealand's Burning: The Settlers' World in the Mid 1880s. By Rollo Arnold. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1994. 320 pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 0-86473-263-5.

ROLLO ARNOLD'S work derives from his observation that New Zealand historiography has largely overlooked the rise of the 'yeoman' farmer. He proposes that a comprehensive overview is required of the nature of settler society by the 1880s. In attempting such an overview, his focal point is the dramatic fires of summer 1885-86. His primary aims are clearly outlined as an understanding of the settler impact upon the landscape, the operation of the central and local political and institutional creations of 1875-85, the economic infrastructure, and agrarian colonial society. These aims, while embedded in the work, are revisited more explicitly in two summarizing chapters.

The book has two parts. Part One, 'Fire Storm Summer', is intended to introduce the general character of colonial society through narrative, and largely focuses upon the settler reaction to the fires as a crisis to be endured, and then overcome through various forms of relief and reconstruction. Arnold had intended that Part One would follow Braudel's notion of an 'overall vision', providing an 'imaginative entry' into the past without 'extensive probings into meaning and significance', highlighting the 'usually anonymous and unrecorded' and 'intimate context' of individual lives. To a large extent Arnold does achieve such a re-creation of the past. However, it could be acknowledged that his narrative is an implicit imposition of significance and meaning, itself the result of principles of *selection* applied to what settlers admittedly regarded as the *ephemeral* records of their experience. Certainly this process of imposition is more explicit in Part Two.

Part Two, a more analytical discussion of colonial settler society, is intended to provide an 'anatomy' of an 'arrangement of interacting systems', and to establish the settlers as agents operating within the structures sketched by an 'integrating network' of patterns. These 'patterns' are explicitly identified as 'day, week, month, year', 'town, country, and bush', 'the village and the globe', 'locality, region, colony', 'medieval to modern', 'democrats, gentry, agrarians, bureaucrats', 'class and interests', and 'capitalism, socialism, and altruism'. It is acknowledged that these patterns do not represent 'discrete and independent categories'. Arnold also acknowledges that the patterns may not have been seen by contemporaries as they include both historians' reflections upon the meaning of the past as well as those contemporary 'shared meanings about reality' which provided the framework of knowledge by which colonial society 'functioned'.

Analogies drawn between the colonial experience and medieval and early modern Europe may appear slightly romantic and anachronistic to some readers. The pattern 'medieval to modern' is problematic when applied to a process of settlement that was prompted and facilitated by the profound economic and socio-cultural transformations of the 'Industrial Revolution'. It is difficult to sustain the proposition that pre-industrial

medieval peasant family life had anything in common with settler New Zealand. Medievalists would steadfastly maintain that the political, economic, social and cultural discontinuities are greater than any continuities. It seems to me that Arnold uses the phrase 'traditional' in an uncritical sense which implies a timeless continuity. As Hobsbawm and many others have argued, the 'traditional' is often of very recent 'invention'.

Part One was explicitly intended to present an 'holistic narrative' that established the general character of colonial society as a 'functioning whole' in which all wrestled with the common problem of fire. The analytical approach of Part Two and the term 'anatomy' similarly suggests that society is being viewed as an integrated totality in which each part contributes to the maintenance of an enduring and autonomous whole. The assumption that society is a 'functioning whole' is no longer widely accepted among anthropologists as it tends incorrectly to imply that culture is unitary, fixed and bounded rather than fluid and permeable. However Arnold does acknowledge the presence of some permeability when he concludes that the settler world view was heavily influenced by 'the enshrined experience of a vital homeland', and he does carefully note that his integrating network of patterns is an 'untidy and overlapping series' and is necessarily incomplete.

Arnold's central conclusion is that we largely find our origins in the settler world. He agrees with the existing literature that colonial settler society was driven by 'a deep rural myth' and proposes that we view that society as characterized by the 'emerging triumph of the yeoman ideal', in which settlers, like many English tenant farmers, sought the prestige and way of life associated with the English gentry. He moves beyond the immediate scope of his study and suggests that this 'yeoman ideology' dominated society and the economy for much of the twentieth century. He concludes that mid-1880s settler New Zealand was a 'jumble of communities' in 'all stages of development and modernisation', characterized by widespread self-help and implicit altruism, and 'much community conviviality' interacting with family life. Conclusions about the essentially 'gregarious' and 'friendly' nature of colonial society at that time can be appreciated in the context of Arnold's explicitly stated attempt to imaginatively re-create and construct 'an awareness of a varied, interacting, living community'. These conclusions differ from the Fairburn argument that settler society was atomized, partly reflecting the different methodological orientations and perhaps explaining why Arnold does not engage with *The Ideal Society and Its Enemies*, which is conspicuously absent from the bibliography. Unlike Fairburn, Arnold's orientation is the search for 'understanding' through a range of perspectives in which the unique, the specific and the concrete are emphasized before the explanation of the general.

Arnold's careful and detailed empirical research is complemented by clear charts, illuminating graphs, apt photographs, evocative illustrations, and fine production, marred only by minor editorial problems with some diagram labels. The comparative method produces illuminating contrasts with other New World colonies and emphasizes aspects of New Zealand's colonial uniqueness. Arnold draws upon his *The Farthest Promised Land* and other scholars for comparative British evidence. A weakness may be the tendency to use his previous published work with the reference 'I have shown'. It perhaps unwisely assumes a self-evident claim immune from further critical examination. Notable omissions from cited comparative literature include Bolton and van Dissel on colonial gentry and Hamer on New World urban societies.

A wider significance of this work is that it returns us to a set of related questions about the essential nature of the emerging settler society. Arnold asks: was settler society re-enacting the history of the Old World, was it predominantly adapting the contemporary forms of the Old World to a new environment, or were there any important aspects of the new society that were unique? These questions have featured in the historiography, most notably in the Sinclair and Oliver general histories. Arnold continues the debate with his

inference that an 'imported' ideology and adaptation to environmental uniqueness characterize the New Zealand experience.

I admire Arnold's work for the fine prose and novel use of approaches derived from anthropology, and the *Annales* 'school' via Braudel, even if I do not accept all the underlying assumptions. Such injections can only be positive in an historiography that has all too often in the past been characterized by a narrow parochialism and a lack of interest in the possibilities of interdisciplinary exchange.

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Coal, Class and Community: The United Mineworkers of New Zealand 1880-1960. By Len Richardson. The University of Auckland Press, Auckland, 1995. 344 pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 1-86940-113-1.

LEN RICHARDSON is a Coaster by birth. This book draws together a scholarly lifetime's work on the coal miners, places that story in its national and international contexts, and provides a model study of a major industry and its workers. His knowledge of the industry, and of the West Coast's geography and larger history, constantly inform his account. The work is also informed by other perspectives, such as social, family and sports' history, and is not confined by the perspectives of labour history.

The book opens with a lucid discussion of the international literature relating to coal miners and deftly discusses the social balance between the 'earnest minority' (autodidacts and self-improvers) and the 'larrikin' element, the importance of women and family, and the ethos of the miners. He moves quickly to the establishment of the colony's first coal mines and the recruitment of skilled hewers. He sketches the struggle between the employers, with their vision of an industry without unions, and the miners' commitment to union. The early struggles on the Coast are dealt with, but he keeps a watchful eye on important events in other provinces. In this period coal miners were 'isolated from the mainstream of colonial life by both their occupation and their attitudes'. Ironically, as time passed they also became a predominantly 'immigrant' community, recruited from Britain and Australia. Yet problems at the pit-face no less than their commitment to unionism saw them increasingly involved in colonial politics. The rout of 1890 ushered in a period of great hardship. Richardson skilfully uses a wide variety of sources to portray this opening period.

In the next three chapters Richardson traces the recovery of unionism among the coal miners and the complex events which saw 'confrontation, challenge and conflict become synonymous with coalfields unionism'. In broad outline the story is well enough known. Until now, however, we have lacked an account of the coal miners and their struggle to establish a national union and a national set of conditions and wages. Yet they provided the drive and energy for 'The New Radicalism' and played a crucial role in the turbulent industrial history of the period from the Blackball strike until the 1920s. Richardson not only clarifies many contemporary issues which were rooted in local and pit-face complexities, but enlarges our understanding of the larger political context. Throughout he conveys the complex ebb and flow of opinion within the mining towns, the shifting balance between ideologues and militants, hewers and truckers (some of whom were more interested in drinking and gambling than any millennium). He also captures the