

Review (History in Other Media)

Blood, Earth, Fire – Whāngai, Whenua, Ahi Kā: The Transformation Of Aotearoa New Zealand. At the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington.

IT IS A CONVOLUTED TRIP: up the first set of stairs to level two of Te Papa Tongarewa, ‘Our Place’, then a zig-zag up the next set of stairs (briefly paying homage to Cook’s cannon en route) and along the Death Star-inspired walkway to *Blood, Earth, Fire – Whāngai, Whenua, Ahi Kā*’s level three exhibition space. The alternative route, taking the lift, would deny you exposure to the Te Papa landscape and landscape is the theme of this, the first new long-term exhibition at Te Papa since 1998. *Blood, Fire and Earth* is about how humans interact with the wider environments of the islands that make up New Zealand; how people define their relationships by their locations; and how those relationships change as the environment changes. The exhibition opened last year and is scheduled to remain open until 2011. The guiding principle is enunciated at the entrance: ‘Hei Taonga nō te Whenua me hoki, anō ki te Whenua — What is given by the land should return to the land’. While text and interpretation are in evidence, this is an exhibition that is also object-rich and full of interactive activities and exhibits. It is a fun, contemporary exhibit.

From the work of scientists such as Trevor Worthy, Richard Holdaway and others, we now know a lot more about the environmental changes that began around 800 years ago when people first came to these islands. Immigrants brought with them their animals and plants and set in motion radical environmental change that continues to this day. One of the first exhibits is a waka for the holding of placenta. The placenta is whenua, and the land is whenua. This is a relationship ingrained in Māori culture and language. Papatūānuku’s (the earth mother) has protected many of the artefacts on display.

The exhibition focuses on post-1769 changes. An ‘arrival screen’ announces the release dates of a host of species. Captain Cook brought the ‘Captain Cooker’ pigs in 1769. Peacocks were released in Wellington in 1843, George Grey introduced emus to Kawau in 1868, and Canterbury had hedgehogs from 1869. Why hedgehogs? The exhibition, while generally informative, does not investigate the hopes and dreams of the individual(s) who provided us with the hedgehog. Some introductions were accidental and unfortunate. You can wander through the ‘shipping container from hell’ and identify pest species lurking in every consignment (hint: there are mosquitoes in the car tyres and maggots in the mangoes but for the rest you are on your own).

There is material on Queen Elizabeth II and Nga Whenua Rahui covenants on private land under the heading ‘Reserving a place in the Great Outdoors’. Curiously, there is no mention of the larger areas of reserved land such as the national parks, scenic reserves, or crown land vested in the Department of Conservation. The innovative historical work of ecologist Geoff Park on public reserve land, which explores the implications of the romantic movement on New Zealand ecology, does not inform the exhibition as much as one might have expected.

The series of videos that were commissioned for the exhibition provide fantastic examples of individuals’ relationships with rural New Zealand. However, as part of an exhibition about people’s relationship to the wider environment they are a little frustrating because there are so few of them and they reflect a limited vision of landscape. Most New Zealanders are urban and their perceptions of the land do not come through strongly.

One of the more solemn elements of the exhibition is the memorial to extinct species. The impact for me was heightened by the knowledge that the Department of Conservation has just released a greatly expanded list of endangered species. It includes not only birds

but reptiles and invertebrates. The list is a reminder, if one is needed, that the process of change within the environment is ongoing and that while mankind can intervene, no one knows what the outcome will be.

There are some touchstones in this exhibition that highlight the pathos of the interaction between landscape and mythology. Serious homage is paid to Herbert Guthrie Smith. Guthrie Smith's work chronicling the changes at Tutira and his lamentation at the destruction of what we might now call biodiversity, have touched the minds and hearts of ecologists internationally. On a lighter note, one good reason for visiting this exhibition is to see the montage of pop culture images of rural life bringing together the 'Ches and Dale' and 'Scottie and Crumpie' advertisements, Fred Dagg and Billy T. James's agrarian observations, Footrot Flats cartoons, and pictures of the Hastings Royal Show c. 1950.

Meaningful generalizations about landscape can be elusive because ideas about landscape are so grounded in individual perceptions and values. It is to the credit of the staff involved in this exhibition that it reflects multiple visions and seeks to actively engage visitors on a number of levels. *Blood, Fire and Earth* informs, provokes and entertains and a visitor can not ask for much more than that.

TONY NIGHTINGALE

Wellington

Temporary closure of Archives New Zealand, Auckland

Archives New Zealand's Auckland Office is moving to new premises at 95 Richard Pearse Drive, Mangere.

This means the following services will be unavailable from May 2007:

- written reference is unavailable from 4 May
- the reading room is closed from 25 May

We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause.

Full services are expected to resume at our new Mangere building on Monday 17 September 2007.