

Disputed Histories: Imagining New Zealand's Pasts. Edited by Tony Ballantyne and Brian Moloughney. University of Otago Press, Dunedin, 2006. 283 pp. NZ price: \$49.95. ISBN 1-877276-16-1.

THIS VOLUME showcases revisionist history at its best. Tony Ballantyne and Brian Moloughney are to be congratulated for bringing together a collection of essays which is both a fitting tribute to Erik Olssen and a fit assessment of some of the outstanding (and often unarticulated) assumptions guiding recent developments in New Zealand history.

It is tempting, given the bold claims to the assertion of 'new histories and unsettled orthodoxies' in Ballantyne and Moloughney's Introduction, to look at the list of contributors and give a 'Yeah, right' reply. While it would be impolite to calculate their median age it is fair to say that these are all established scholars, many of whom rate as Olssen's contemporaries or near contemporaries. And most are writing on subjects about which they have written before. Rather than detracting from the volume the maturity of the scholarship and the sense of authority conveyed by the authors becomes its great strength. These writers know whereof they speak and use their extensive subject knowledge as a platform for reflection and engagement, not as a place to rest their laurels. Atholl Anderson's contribution, 'Retrievable Time: Prehistoric Colonization of South Polynesia from the Outside In and the Inside Out', is exemplary. His argument that South Polynesia's settlement can be profitably analyzed in terms of the history of 'Greater New Zealand' brings a great wealth of detail to the service of a big idea. Judith Binney, to take another example, has written extensively about the history of the Maori of eastern Bay of Plenty. Here she re-examines the stories of a group of inter-connected families in the region to foreground the subtle interplay of ideas about race and culture in the lives of 'mixed race', or 'half-caste' individuals in the mid to late nineteenth century. New Zealand, in contrast to many other colonial societies, did not witness the emergence of a distinct mixed race or mestizo population, yet, as Binney illustrates, we can still learn much from an attentive examination of the lives of mixed race individuals and the networks which connected them. Many of these are unhappy stories. The instability of ideas about the meaning of mixed racial inheritance and social identity are highlighted by their successes and failures. These are parables of being, becoming and belonging which, she notes, resonate loudly within contemporary cultural spaces as individuals increasingly endeavour to acknowledge multiple and mixed racial/ethnic identities. Like Anderson's, her essay is a model of mature scholarship, fine grained, finely wrought and well argued.

It is difficult to do justice to all the essays within a short review. Summaries must suffice. Michael Reilly contextualizes Maori ideas of 'rangitiratanga' within the larger framework of ancient Polynesian leadership practices, and raises important questions about the extent to which Maori history is well-served by a tendency to locate it within New Zealand history, particularly the history of New Zealand proto-nationalism à la James Belich and Michael King. Ballantyne and Moloughney chip in with an essay on 'Asia in Muihiku', another fine revisiting of the history of relatively well-trodden ground. Again the utility of the national history framework is questioned. What, Ballantyne and Moloughney ask, can be learned from displacing 'New Zealand' from the history of the southern South Island and replacing it with Asia? Quite a lot it turns out. David Thomson's discussion of the population dynamics shaping nineteenth-century settlers' family lives gives the lie to the stereotype of demographic history as poorly written obscurantism. Thomson dispatches his topic with economy and style, showing why numbers matter and what they can and cannot tell historians. The so-called 'frontier' family structure emerges as only a bit player in settler family life: New Zealand's nineteenth-century colonists, he shows, shared more with their British counterparts than we have chosen to

acknowledge. Never one to shy away from 'big idea' history, Miles Fairburn confronts the exceptionalism which he sees as permeating mainstream accounts of New Zealand's past: a boldly argued attack on the complacency of others, with controversial and uncomfortable implications, it is vintage Fairburn. 'Chance residues', Bronwyn Dalley's essay on photographic sources and the writing of social history, is the least demanding piece in the book. Most historians would agree that photographs 'open rich doors into this country's social history', 'challenge conventional views, offer new insights, and flesh out existing accounts' (p.189). Barbara Brookes's examination of the furore which accompanied Germaine Greer's visit to New Zealand in 1972 focuses on issues of style, language and audience as the key to understanding the nature of this cultural watershed. Brookes writes with verve, relishing the opportunity to juxtapose the witchy, transgressive appeal Greer had in her supporters' eyes with her opponents' visceral dislike of hairy-legged harridanism. The 'war of words' which ensued illuminates the intersecting histories of politics, sex/gender and society. Finally, the collection is rounded off with the edited transcript of a conversation between Erik Olssen and the volume's editors. Titled 'The Shaping of a Field', it does not quite fit, being neither a comprehensive historiographical overview of the era in which Olssen produced his major works, nor a thorough-going assessment of those works themselves.

The title of this volume is a bit of an over-sell. History is not so much disputed or reimagined by the essays within as scrutinized and tested within social history's best traditions of inquiry. Nor is it clear how seriously we are meant to take the plural pasts of the volume's title. The carefulness with which most of the contributors support their arguments with detailed research and close-grained analysis sits oddly with the idea of an imagined past or pasts. For the most part the essays depict the past as singular, albeit not unitary. The past is depicted as knowable, with the caveat that different subject positions and different historical positions tend to produce different kinds of knowledge. Theories about how the past is best approached by researchers are treated as testable. Historians heavily committed to the linguistic turn will most likely find fault with the approaches taken here. Yet, as the essays illustrate, there is much to be gained from history's preference for theory as the servant of empirical inquiry, not the master. Postmodernity's emphasis on textual complexity can easily lead into historical dead ends where a fixation on the past as it has been written about displaces historical investigation into the past as it happened. None of these authors has any desire to end up in such a cul-de-sac. Language is treated as a tool and a resource for historians, so too are cultural artifacts such as photographs and the material remains unearthed by archeological excavation. Historiographically aware but not historiographically myopic, *Disputed Histories* is a stimulating and confident volume that embraces the complexity of the New Zealand past without ignoring the need to pass judgement on what those complexities mean.

DEBORAH MONTGOMERIE

The University of Auckland

New Zealand as it Might Have Been. Edited by Stephen Levine. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2006. 300 pp. NZ price: \$34.95. ISBN 0-86473-545-6.

COUNTERFACTUAL HISTORY IS FASHIONABLE and problematic. A common justification is that it demonstrates the contingency of history and the illegitimacy of so-called determinist approaches. At its best, counterfactual history can be illuminating; the classic example is considering outcomes in Vietnam if Kennedy had stayed away from Dallas. This collection, arising out of an invitation-only conference, is with a few