

Reviews (Books)

The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History. By J.G.A. Pocock. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge & New York, 2005. 344pp. UK price: £17.99. ISBN 1-00-521-61645-X.

J.G.A. POCKOCK'S PROPOSAL FOR AN 'ANTIPODEAN PERCEPTION' on British history deserves to be known and debated by New Zealand historians and their students. A world-renowned historian of ideas as well as an early modern historian, John Pocock is also a passionate New Zealander who is acutely aware of the systems through which his own identity travels. As an undergraduate he attended Karl Popper's lectures on scientific method at Canterbury College in 1945 (MA, 1946), and after his appointment as the first Professor of Political Science at Canterbury (1963–1965) he migrated to a chair of history in the United States, where he is now Harry C. Black Professor Emeritus at Johns Hopkins University. *The Discovery of Islands* is a treasure; named after a poem by Allen Curnow, it is a brilliant experiment in writing history from a cosmopolitan New Zealander's perspective.

The essays selected for this volume are rich in insights on such questions as how the histories of political communities are generated and whether these histories will continue. Pocock reconceptualizes British history in answer to the (post-colonial) thesis that the loss of the British Empire rendered British history problematic. Of keen interest for this journal's readers are his thoughts on a British history of New Zealand since 1973. That year marked Britain's entry to the European Economic Community, which James Belich — one New Zealand historian who has read and absorbed Pocock's reasoning — advances as a turning point from a phase of 'recolonisation' to 'decolonisation'. Pocock responded to this political and mental shift in 1973 with his classic paper 'British history: a plea for a new subject' that he presented to the New Zealand Historical Association Conference in Christchurch. First published in this journal in 1974, the paper appears as chapter 2 in *Discovery of Islands*. Pocock's plea became the foundation of the 'new' British history written to make sense of the empire's demise. His plea deserves equivalent standing in New Zealand historiography, especially given the present enthusiasm for 'British world' and 'transnational' approaches. For Pocock proposed that we construct our own new cosmologies, in which each star redefined its 'tangential identity by remapping the various systems within which it moves' (p.43). He therefore applauds Belich's notion of the 'protein bridge' between New Zealand and Britain but offers a critique of Belich's thesis of 'recolonisation' by refuting that New Zealand exhibited a 'recolonial mentality' in 1942 by leaving 2NZEF in Europe (p.194).

Pocock has long advocated transnational history. He argues that British history has been the work of diverse peoples and that this only becomes clear once historians adopt an 'oceanic' and 'archipelagic' perspective. Different narratives hold together as 'British history'; New Zealand belongs to an archipelago of histories that could not simply be annulled by Britain's return to Europe. The southern ocean linked the three southern neo-Britains — New Zealand, Australia and South Africa (the Cape Colony and Natal) — with the Atlantic archipelago. Migration to the antipodes differed from migration across the Atlantic. To this reader, the distance that Pocock perceives between the 'empire of settlement' and the 'empire of strategy' succinctly explains how the United Kingdom's national interest did not correspond with the interests of the southern dominions.

These essays traverse Pocock's contributions to three related strands of British history: first, the history of the British Isles; second, the history of the British Empire that made the British world; and third, the periodization of English history into ages of unions and the interaction of those unions with three successive empires. The argument underscores

how New Zealand history formed within and interacts with the histories of the second and third British empires, where the second empire refers to the era of global naval supremacy over sea routes from the Napoleonic period to 1914 (the era that saw the 'birth of the modern world', to borrow a phrase from C.A. Bayly), and the third empire refers to the colonies of settlement formed as a result of the second — maritime — empire. New Zealand, of course, was one of the settler colonies that after self-government wrote their own histories. In this way Pocock advances a multi-historical and interactive model of British history.

A particular gem is the introductory essay titled 'The Antipodean Perception' written specially for this volume. This shows how, unlike some advocates of transnational history, Pocock does not see the nation state as confining; rather it is a useful way of living in a history made by many actors. There is a tart reference to the work of Keith Sinclair. Observing that New Zealand had two totemic birds, the New Zealand domiciled kiwi and the migratory godwit, Pocock likens Sinclair to the kiwi and himself to the godwit, one a traveller who returned and the other an expatriate who did not (p.14). By implication New Zealand history is the history of New Zealanders, of the people rather than of these islands themselves.

In 1992 the *New Zealand Journal of History* also published Pocock's address to the NZHA Conference held at Canterbury in 1991, 'Tangata whenua and Enlightenment anthropology', which reappears as chapter 12 in this volume. Only this year have Pocock's ideas about the concept of tangata whenua generated a response, by Te Maire Tau, analysing the logic of 'original occupation' and what an 'indigenous' identity means once historical claims are settled by Maori against the Crown. His reply demonstrates how Maori as well as Pakeha have British histories, as Pocock maintains.¹

Part 4 of *Discovery of Islands*, 'New Zealand in the strange multiplicity', comprises three chapters that traverse the themes of the neo-Britains and the three empires; the tangata whenua, all of whom started out as 'tangata waka' (Pocock's term) and who then proceeded through poetic appropriation to imagine a relationship with the environment; and New Zealand and the Treaty of Waitangi. Pocock's argument that the settler-indigenous histories of Australia and New Zealand are the product of British expansion is uncontroversial. What marks him out is his insistence that both national cultures participate in reinterpreting British history (p.189). Pocock's challenge is not to cease writing national histories but to write ones that interrelate with histories of empire and the world. The third chapter in this section, which tackles the idea of sovereignty, concludes with his own weariness at being deconstructed. According to Pocock people live in history, not in the whenua; they come and go. But political community and sovereignty matter and are worth holding on to (p.255); the implication is that debunking national histories is counter-productive.

An erudite, profound and unexpectedly uplifting collection of essays, *Discovery of Islands* deserves to be read carefully and often, celebrated and discussed. John Pocock is to be thanked for assembling this work so that his thought is more accessible to a New Zealand audience. The next generation aspire to be godwits too, and it behoves us to encourage them to read this book.

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NOTES

1 Te Maire Tau, 'The Discovery of Islands and the Stories of Settlement', *Thesis Eleven*, 92, 1 (2008), pp.11–28.