

Reviews (Books)

The New Oxford History of New Zealand. Edited by Giselle Byrnes. Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2009. 738pp. NZ price: \$99.95. ISBN 978-0-195584-71-4.

IN RECENT YEARS REVISIONISM HAS DOMINATED the history of settler societies. On the one hand, historians have argued that nations like Australia, Canada and the United States do not possess exceptional histories but are best understood in the context of the transnational movement of ideas and ideologies, people and customs, money, staples and consumer goods. Second, in their determination to challenge national history, they have returned to exploring how settler societies like Canada and Australia were shaped and influenced by the institutions and ties of Empire. The recently published *Canada and the British Empire* and *Australia's Empire*¹ in the Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series are not intended as histories of Canada and Australia but of the roles of these two colonies/nations within the Empire. It is indeed Philip Buckner, Deryck Schreuder and Stuart Ward's contention that the histories of these colonies/nations can only be understood within that context. As an aside, I might add that I am not persuaded that the focus on transnational history is quite as radically revisionist as its practitioners (and particularly its converts) have claimed. The historiographies of the United States, Canada and Australia never became fully dominated by nationalist and exceptionalist narratives. Instead, for many years historians have sought to understand the histories of these societies within the context of the interchange of values and institutions, the processes of cultural transmission. The language may be new but the approach has a long history.

This collection consists of 23 essays relating to the political, economic, social and diplomatic history of New Zealand. Surprisingly, given the preoccupation with cultural history by Australian, American and British historians, there is very little attention paid to the history of New Zealand culture either of the popular or elite kind, although Judith Binney reminds us that the history of memory is not an ephemeral subject by demonstrating its cultural and political importance to the Maori; and Caroline Daley's chapter on 'Modernity, Consumption and Leisure' contains a stimulating discussion of rational and irrational leisure and of how television and the internet have combined to recreate the home as the prime site of recreation — albeit not in a Victorian sense. What I found especially interesting in this chapter was the way in which rational and irrational leisure were discussed without direct reference to the role of class. In North America, the United Kingdom and Australia the nineteenth-century debates over culture and its roles took place partly along class lines. If this was not the case in New Zealand then this was indeed exceptional. However, given that the preoccupation of this volume is with tribal, regional, class, gender, rural and urban diversity, and given that cultural history lends itself particularly to the study of marginal and marginalized groups, its limited application in the essays in this volume is even more surprising.

The essays are determinedly and self-consciously revisionist. Indeed, the agenda for this collection is set out in the preface and the introduction. Giselle Byrnes questions an older interpretation of New Zealand history, most articulately argued by Keith Sinclair, which made the claim for the country's exceptionalism, and which also argued for the importance of the history of national identity. But Byrnes argues that the identities of New Zealanders were more shaped by family, class and gender than by nation. And so the agenda of this book is to challenge a paradigm that stressed progress, development and national identity. It is also to question the notion of exceptionalism by locating New Zealand in wider imperial, trans-Tasman, Pacific and global contexts.

The challenge set out by the editor at the beginning is re-iterated in the introductions to many of the individual chapters. Almost all of the authors are concerned, in one way or another, to dispute historical orthodoxies about New Zealand history. In his discussion of the impact of humans on the New Zealand environment Paul Star argues that while farming brought economic prosperity it also led to ecological damage and that conservation remains hamstrung if introduced species are only excluded from areas of preservation. Such an interpretation defies the traditional understanding of the link between farming and civilization/progress/prosperity. In his discussion of politics and the state between 1769 and 1893 Tony Ballantyne integrates political history with issues of race, class and gender. This moves the debate beyond a narrow political and institutional context but in failing to discuss the political ideologies that shaped the debates over representative government and influenced the emergence of class politics he misses the opportunity to locate New Zealand's political culture within a wider colonial and imperial world. Damon Salesa challenges the paradigm of progress and egalitarianism by showing that New Zealand was also an imperial (Pacific) power and not always a benevolent one at that. Jim McAloon argues that the story of the nineteenth-century New Zealand economy was not a simple one relating to dependence on Great Britain but rather one involving integration into a global economy. Katie Pickles convincingly overthrows the notion that New Zealand identity was based on the exclusively male Anzac myth, for women too were active creators of an imperial identity which they conceived as entirely compatible with national identity. Roberto Rabel denies James Belich's argument that war was the nation's most popular social activity. Rather, at least after 1945, it was peripheral to New Zealand history and culture. In turn, Philippa Mein Smith takes convincing exception to Keith Sinclair's argument that New Zealand was constructed in opposition to Australia. In showing the close links that developed and were extended across the ditch she argues that it was the Tasman world that was exceptional. But when I read this I found myself wondering if neither Australia nor New Zealand were exceptional, why was the Tasman exceptional?

The theme of challenging accepted interpretations is continued in subsequent chapters. John Stenhouse argues that religion has played a greater role in New Zealand history than historians have allowed. Even if the 1960s produced greater secularism as people turned from traditional denominations, it also created new forms of religion. Like Roberto Rabel, Melanie Nolan takes issue with James Belich, this time with his argument that New Zealanders usually tried to remove inequality when and where they found it. She concludes that social mobility and opportunity existed in New Zealand but the existence of class hierarchy and gender, class and race divisions meant that egalitarianism (and a commitment to it) was far from universal. Angela Wanhalla is less interested in overthrowing accepted interpretations about family, community and gender than in exploring new territory. Her discussion of interracial intimacy is detailed, sensitive and insightful — a wonderful contribution to our understanding of Maori-Pakeha relations. In their chapters on sexual morality and health and illness Chris Brickell and Catharine Colborne both relate their subjects to debates taking place in the wider worlds of religion, sociology and medicine. I especially liked Colborne's observation that late nineteenth-century doctors were not just purveyors of medicine and its progress but also carriers of racist and misogynist imperial ideology.

The theme of historiography overturned is carried to the end. Richard Hill's discussion of 'Maori and State Policy' denies the older national narrative that colonization was benign and exceptional. His chapter contains a detailed and persuasive account of Maori resistance, survival and adjustment. Geoff Bertram's account of the twentieth-century economy is less self-consciously revisionist but is thorough and sophisticated in its analysis and techniques. But David Capie's final chapter on New Zealand's external relations returns to the revisionist mode. Challenging notions of New Zealand's foreign

relations as a history of a move towards national independence he argues that the colony and nation's external policies and alliances were largely driven by factors beyond the control of the nation's policymakers. Rather, policy followed changing patterns of trade and shifting centres of power in Europe, the Americas and Asia.

I found it difficult to review a book of this length, which contained so many chapters on such a diverse range of topics. I regret that I have not had space to comment on every chapter in the collection because there is not a single deficient chapter. This is a very strong set of essays and in my judgement this fine collection constitutes a major contribution not only to New Zealand history but also to the history of settler societies. It challenges those of us who write Australian, South African, Canadian, British and even (colonial) North American history, to rethink our approaches and our subject matter. It succeeds in its ambition to destabilize and to complicate general history writing, and especially the general history writing of New Zealand. I appreciated the argumentative and revisionist qualities of the essays. However, I also think that while it is the role of the historian to be critical, there is also a value in acknowledging the works that have influenced the field in the past; there is a value in generosity. In this volume the works of Keith Sinclair and James Belich are often used as yardsticks by which the authors can measure the — if I may use this term — exceptional nature of their own findings. Indeed, in some essays I detected a determination to sweep away past historiography. But I also think it is worth remembering that Sinclair and Belich as well as many other historians who wrote within earlier historiographical traditions have made enormous contributions to New Zealand historiography, contributions that needed greater acknowledgement. Perhaps in 20 years or so the contributors to the next *New Oxford History of New Zealand* will be less concerned with sweeping away the works of their predecessors than with integrating older understandings into newer interpretations.

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NOTE

1 Philip Buckner, ed., *Canada and the British Empire*, Oxford University Press, 2008; Deryck M. Schreuder and Stuart Ward, eds, *Australia's Empire*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

The Best Man Who Ever Served the Crown? A Life of Donald McLean. By Ray Fargher. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2007. 407pp. NZ price: \$50.00. ISBN 978-0-86473-560-7.

DONALD MCLEAN IS A KEY FIGURE in New Zealand history. As land purchase agent, as an author of confiscation on the East Coast and as Native Minister, he was instrumental in the transfer of millions of acres of Maori land to the Crown. His actions have been investigated by numerous research reports and Waitangi Tribunal reports in the Treaty claims process. Inevitably, McLean emerges from that discourse as one-dimensional, with the focus each time on his actions in isolation in a single district or time period. Now, at last, there is a major biography of this complex man, which evaluates his actions in a way that makes him fully rounded and easier to understand. The dialogue between moral and religious convictions on the one hand and a state official's actions on the other is Ray Fargher's main theme and one that resonates today as it did in the nineteenth century.

Fargher has carried out exhaustive research into the voluminous papers of a man who kept everything, even his laundry lists. The biography is primarily a study of McLean's dealings with Maori, especially over land. There are glimpses into his family life, his marriage and the chaotic financing of his pastoral runs. We get an insight into how private