

Correspondence

THE NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF HISTORY 44, 2, (2010) contained a review of my book *This Horrid Practice: The Myth and Reality of Traditional Maori Cannibalism*. Normally, I am disinclined to respond to reviews, granting reviewers their right to express their opinions. However, almost every aspect of this particular review was misleading to an extent I have never come across before, and it demands some correction.

The reviewer, John Bevan-Smith, started by claiming that I was ‘putting tangata whenua on trial for the crime of cannibalism’. No such thing is done in the book, and neither did I conclude that cannibalism was a crime. Indeed, traditional Maori cannibalism could not have been a crime because it took place (at least prior to 1840) in a jurisdiction in which the act was not regarded as criminal. Bevan-Smith then goes on to refer to the works of Joel Polack, Augustus Earle and other books produced in the first half of the nineteenth century as ‘penny-dreadfuls of early colonial literature’. This is a substantial misrepresentation. While they have their obvious limitations, these works have been relied upon by many historians for over a century. To simply bundle them up into this category and thus dismiss them is reckless. Bevan-Smith continues, citing (footnote 12 in his review) a quote from the *Athenaeum* claiming that Polack ‘could say nothing as to the existence of cannibal rites from his own knowledge’. These are not Polack’s words, however — something that Bevan-Smith conveniently concealed. I have quoted Polack’s words directly in my book, including when he provided detailed notes of the methods of Maori cannibalism (p.123) and the nature of its practice after battle (pp.161–2).

Regarding Cook’s visit to Queen Charlotte Sound, it is manifestly not presented as several events as Bevan-Smith alleges. I note that the journal entries I included are all accompanied by dates — either in the text or the references — to ensure the date-range of the comments was recorded, and further note that these clearly cluster around late January. In addition, I ensured that the description of the event was relayed *in the sequence it was written by those involved*, rather than artificially compressing journal dates to make it seem like all those involved wrote all their comments on the same day — which they did not. The intent is to demonstrate the way in which evidence for cannibalism unfolded in the minds of those present. The perception of evidence is one of the issues that is a key feature for the section of the book dealing with the arguments of the revisionists. Bevan-Smith goes on to allege that I deliberately omitted part of a Cook quote in the middle of a quotation, ‘including Cook’s confession [sic] that his first-voyage account of cannibalism has been “discredited by many persons”’. The material phrase from the omitted section is: ‘That the New Zealanders are cannibals, can now no longer be doubted. The account given of this in my former voyage, being partly founded on circumstances, was, as I afterwards understood, discredited by many persons.’ In this context, the discrediting refers to doubt. No-one in England could actually discredit Cook at this time because they had not been to New Zealand. This is not a ‘confession’ at all by Cook (it would not make sense if it was, given what he had written about cannibalism) but just an expression of what had happened when people read the account of the voyage. Bevan-Smith is taking things completely out of context to make his accusation and distorts the meaning of Cook’s words in the process.

Elsewhere in his review, Bevan-Smith quotes me as saying, ‘[Michael] King of course didn’t even mention it [cannibalism] in his history of New Zealand’. This is *not* a quote from my book. In my book, I stated clearly that the issue of cannibalism in King’s book ‘was circumvented’. The meaning is substantially different, and relates to the extent of attention some historians have given to the topic. Another error on Bevan-Smith’s part is his serious accusation that I moved the date of an incident so it appeared that it took place two days after Cook’s observation of an act of cannibalism. The reviewer is again plainly wrong

here. I did not move any date. Rather, I make it clear that ‘Two days after this event, Cook received a further set of accounts of cannibal activity from a number of his crew’. This is different from saying that the events took place two days after. The emphasis is clearly on when Cook received the accounts, as opposed to when the events actually happened.

Bevan-Smith leaves some of his strongest criticism for my statement that ‘cannibalism was certainly practised in the South Pacific, most probably for thousands of years prior to the Polynesian migration to New Zealand’. He challenges my use of Degusta as a source, claiming that the reference does not provide definitive evidence that there was cannibalism in the region. Putting aside the substantial literature that contradicts Bevan-Smith’s argument, the claim that the Degusta reference does not provide definitive evidence is misleading. Degusta asserted that as far as the evidence he analysed is concerned, ‘the choice is to accept an inference of cannibalism or conclude that nothing can be known about prehistoric diet’. This is about as definitive as archaeology can be on the topic.

The reviewer also alleges that I imply that Polack was an eyewitness to cannibalism. Once more, this is entirely false, with Bevan-Smith having very selectively chosen his quotes to support his allegation. I make clear on p.235 of my book that Polack transcribed a first-hand account. This is made explicit on pp.106–7 (even naming the eyewitness that Polack got his account from: a trader called Anscow). In the book, I emphasize that Polack was responsible for ‘writing down a first-hand observation’. Nowhere do I claim — as Bevan-Smith suggests — that Polack was an eyewitness to this event. There are many other items I could add to the inventory of Bevan-Smith’s errors in his review, but the constraints of space (and, I suspect, the patience of readers) do not allow for this. I remain completely in the dark as to Bevan-Smith’s motives for the approach he took in his review, but his survey of my book broke all the conventions of academic reviews, failed completely in terms of its accuracy and does its author a huge disservice.

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Editors’ note: this correspondence is now closed. Any further comments can be directed to the individual authors.