

Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand's Colonial Past. By Tony Ballantyne. Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 2012. 374pp. NZ price: \$49.99. ISBN: 9781927131435.

This collection of self-curated essays is spun from a decade of writing about the relationship between the particular conditions of New Zealand's colonial experience and broader systems of imperial formation. The mingled yarn of a historian's output of journal articles and book chapters is rarely constructed with the ultimate intention of being brought together as a single compendium, and the result might inevitably show the tensions of trying to tie together dispersed ideas with a unified thread. But this collection, topped and tailed with framing reflections and including two new custom-made chapters, allows Ballantyne to track some of the key themes in his work – connections, empire, writing, and place – and in so doing reveals him to be a deeply thoughtful historian and a regional lightning rod for some of the key intellectual shifts in colonial history writing over the period.

The opening section, 'Reframing Colonialism', comprises a single 2001 article on 'Race and the Webs of Empire', and as the signal piece in setting Ballantyne's intellectual agenda, the article rehearses the central structuring framework of his *Orientalism and Race*, published the same year and based on his 1999 PhD thesis. Here the web metaphor is deployed as both a structure and a process, fragile yet dynamic, a system in which a seemingly peripheral colonial node could be fixed at the centre of its own multiple axes of information and influence. Such a metaphor provided an alternative to the heart and arteries, or the spoked wheel, as a version of imperial social formation. It resisted the centre/periphery binary, added horizontal to vertical as a dimension of connectedness, and offered an alternative architecture in which both settler and indigenous groups could be understood to resist the centralizing hegemony of the metropole and to construct alternative histories and subjectivities.

Ballantyne's craft lies in a novel deployment of a metaphor that had been gaining traction in the academy for some time. Clifford Geertz, after all, had proposed human culture to be 'webs of significance', and globalization scholarship from the 1980s stressed interconnections and interdependencies as key analytical frames that could challenge the exceptionalism of national history-making. At the start of the 1990s, Stuart Hall had also argued that the nature of modern identities was predicated on historical processes of colonialism, commodity exchange and migration that wrought subject peoples and places into 'webs of interrelationships'. Such intellectual traditions, it might be said, gave Ballantyne a non-exclusive licence to use the metaphor across the British imperial world.

As Ballantyne's heuristic of choice, the web shimmers with possibilities. Subsequent chapters reveal his skill in tracking the movement of ideas across region and globe, all with the aim of exploring the heritage of colonization and placing New Zealand's past and present in a holistic analytical order. The metaphor is used lightly but insistently to reject the primacy of metropolitan-centred views of empire as well as to counter what he sees as the intellectual sclerosis of nation-bounded histories.

The four essays in 'Connections' track multiple pathways of racial formation and ideologies of cultural difference that can be mapped across the Asian region.

The ways that Māori encounter Asia are seen to be representational as well as literal, traced along the filaments of religious traditions and print cultures (including Māori newspapers) as well as embodied in the cross-cultural encounter of individuals. Here he seeks a broader sense of the deep history between New Zealand and Asia that has been occluded by the cultural nationalism of New Zealand biculturalism, in which Treaty-derived visions of the nation shape narrow readings of the past. Histories of non-Pākehā and non-Māori are seen as struggling to fit into a straitened version of national identity. Māori identity itself is refracted across this section through its fluid and never static relationship with the Other, whether Asian or Pākehā.

By the end of this section the reader has a definitive sense of Ballantyne's agenda. Despite his contemporary glosses on the original essays, however, there is no linear narrative to drive the book along. Put simply, there are too many beginnings and beginnings again, too much repetitive mapping of the scholarship and clearing of the critical undergrowth, all of which hinders the reader traversing this otherwise intriguing skein of themes. A chapter on 'India in New Zealand' is giddily sectioned in its coverage (tea, cosmology, missionary practice, print culture), but never deep enough to reap the full harvest of this talented historian. It is at times as if the model-building and polemical critiques of New Zealand historiographical traditions vis-à-vis cultural difference were more important than the history itself.

But just when the sticky web seems confounding, new sightlines open up to reveal the acuity of Ballantyne's optic. The problematic of the colonial archive is itself threaded through the essays as an object of critique, perhaps nowhere better than in a chapter on the elusive *Te Anu*. This South Asian sailor, nameless and borderless, nevertheless personifies the deracination of the individual historical subject from their home, at the same time throwing light on the ways in which highly mobile people traversed the porous spatial and ideological boundaries of cultural order and difference.

Three essays on 'Empire' open with a new take on sealing and whaling incursions connecting the south to British cultural forms, long before the benchmark date of 1840. An evaluation of the place of Christianity in debates over colonization, and a discussion of the role of information in times of crisis, round out the section. All three confirm one of the key contributions of Ballantyne's oeuvre – the central role of writing, communication, the print medium and cultures of literacy in mapping, coordinating and impacting indigenous cultures. Literacy runs around his web along multiple and criss-crossing wires; Māori engaged with and appropriated introduced literacies as required, oral and printing traditions coexisted, while pre- and postcolonial beliefs were hardwired together in novel ways.

'Writing' becomes the rubric of the next section, and studies of the mobility of knowledge as 'intellectual traffic' again stress what happens when different knowledge orders meet, the nexus between literacy and conquest, and the ways in which the cultures of colonized populations were textualized and thereby transformed. Ballantyne's canny inflection is to see writing in the imperial network as nested in real material circumstances rather than simply as pure representation. He tracks with great insight the manner in which writing should be read with issues of circulation,

location and reception in mind. The archive too – as for many of his precursors and contemporaries – comes in for further analysis as a site of critical analysis as much as a source of evidence.

Finally, in contributions from 2010 and 2011, Ballantyne neatly but belatedly discovers ‘Place’, something that cultural geographers and urban historians amongst others have long known. ‘Thinking Local’ opens with a bold (and by now repetitive) assertion that national histories have overdetermined understandings of New Zealand’s past, a point made just as succinctly a decade before him, for example, by David Hamer’s *New Towns in the New World*, which amongst other things was critical of national historical writing, and reoriented a view of New Zealand’s history away from its apparently inevitable evolution into a nation state towards a much more fluid and contingent reading of colonial systems. Ballantyne’s survey of community formation and association life in Victorian-era Gore is nonetheless convincing as an assertion of the utility of factoring local specificity into the reckoning of networked worlds.

There is no doubt that Ballantyne is established as a key exponent of a new vision in colonial history, and this collection places him at the centre of an intellectual web that has strengthened the scholarship of racial formations and cross-cultural interactions in vital ways. The essay collection can be a slippery genre: too easily self-referential, overstating its aims to critical originality, and unnecessarily prolix and repetitive. By the middle of the book (and the concomitant decade in which these essays were written) historians of New Zealand had perhaps become accustomed to Tony Ballantyne telling them what to do. Miles Fairburn, Greg Denning, James Belich and Jock Phillips are all sideswiped in Ballantyne’s attempt to drive a new model of New Zealand’s past. But the past, Ballantyne rightly reminds us, is complicated, messy, interrogative and argumentative. Like the partial histories of biculturalism that he sets in his sights – or indeed any history – Ballantyne is himself liable to ‘emphasise certain themes and actors at the expense of others’ (p.55). But the boldness of his vision is to unshackle histories of colonialism from the problems of the present as an ultimate challenge to the historian and the citizen, both of whom are easily seduced by the partiality of national imaginaries.

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Making a New Land: Environmental Histories of New Zealand. New Edition. Edited by Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking. Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2013. 396pp. NZ price: \$50. ISBN: 9781877578526.

In a climate-changing world, environmental history is taking a central role in debates about global warming, anthropogenic change and the future of sustainability. Tom Griffiths argued that environmental history was ‘still sub-consciously emerging’