

Review Article

The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict. By James Belich. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1986. 396 pp. N.Z. price: \$39.95.

IF EVER a work was justifiably called 'seminal' it is this one. Dr Belich's reassessment of the nineteenth century wars is revolutionary in several ways. Firstly it re-examines the main battles — the military history — in their social and political context. It largely overturns the received version, embodied notably in James Cowan's two-volume work of 1922-3. Contrary to the general view that the Maori went down to inevitable defeat after some heroic, but ill co-ordinated, sporadic and ultimately futile resistance, Belich argues that Maori resistance was well-planned, mostly well co-ordinated, and highly effective. The Maori won the Northern War of 1845-6, stalemated the British in Taranaki in 1860-1, allowed them only a distinctly limited victory in Waikato in 1863-4, and under Titokowaru and Te Kooti in 1868-9 almost reversed that result. Only overwhelming British numbers and the difficulty for a small agricultural people of supplying an adequate fighting force over a long period of time denied the Maori strategic victory.

Whilst these assessments are not totally new (the stalemate in Taranaki and the British failure to destroy the King movement being already established in New Zealand historiography) they are argued with fresh force and conviction, and their contemporary significance is demonstrated much more clearly than before.

Belich furthermore shows, from detailed examination of contemporary evidence, including Maori evidence, that many battles subsequently claimed by the British and by historians as victories were either hollow victories or actual defeats. Moreover, Maori victories were not, as chagrined soldiers or colonists claimed, the result of overwhelming Maori numbers on the day, or because British generals were incompetent and their troops drunken and cowardly. On the contrary, the Maori were always outnumbered, but nevertheless small groups of them, through skilful leadership and battle tactics, regularly defeated adversaries who were well-led, efficient and brave.

Belich then argues that the false picture we have long lived with stems from 'the dominant interpretation of race relations', which is 'the product of a dialectic between events and preconceptions' (pp.311, 321) and holds that European people and cultures were necessarily superior to non-white people and tribal cultures and were therefore destined to triumph. In Belich's eloquent language, 'the European monopoly of the higher mental faculties was the inner tabernacle of the Victorian racial attitudes' (p.326). British losses could not therefore be attributed to regular features of the Maori military system, nor to superior skill and forethought on the part of Maori combatants. British defeats were almost accidental, and the shocked colonists tended to expunge them from historical record. The 'final safety net' of

white supremacy, says Belich, 'was to forget' (p.321). Titokowaru's victories were so devastating that after his eventual demise 'they paid him the ultimate compliment of forgetting him, as a child does a nightmare' (p.235).

On the specific question of the Maori success in battle, Belich's work is very convincing. He has canvassed the contemporary evidence thoroughly and professionally. Occasionally he appears to give more weight to the sources which best suit his case — by attributing outcomes to intentions. But generally one is left in no doubt. Indeed he tries to be careful not to claim too much, and carefully assesses Maori weaknesses as well as strengths. It is clear that much depends on the use by the most successful Maori leaders of what Belich calls 'modern *pa*' — complex trench and bunker systems constructed so as to neutralize superior British fire power, with false targets to draw the enemy into attack, and concealed positions to shoot them down once they were committed. These, combined with a tactical ability to force the British to fight on ground chosen by the Maori, command respect now as they did from shaken British officers then. Although one would like to know more about the traditional elements behind all this — relations between a traditional *pa* and a modern *pa* for example, or the social relations between Maori 'generals' and their followers — it would be difficult to challenge Belich's analysis.

Moreover, his discovery that British distortion of the outcome of battles and campaigns operated according to a consistent pattern has opened the way to fruitful interpretation and important methodological insights. The important thing, he says, is not the detection of bias, but 'How, why and in what ways did bias work? Precisely how did it effect [sic] interpretation, and how can it be used against itself?' (p.335). This cluster of questions is skilfully elucidated in the discussion of the wars.

Unfortunately Dr Belich then claims rather too much for his methods in related chapters on 'The Maori Achievement' and 'The Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict'. Thus he outlines, in order to attack, the 'legend of New Zealand race relations' — a kind of Fatal Impact view. It 'emphasizes inevitability, minimizes the importance of conflict and Maori success in it, and presents a pattern of nineteenth-century race relations which is like a simple slope — short, straight, and for the Maori, downward' (p.300) to a nadir from which they were rescued by more enlightened settler policies and the Young Maori Party. Previous historians — John Owens, Ann Parsonson, John A. Williams, Keith Sorrenson, and I — are said to have 'chipped away' at this old legend. We are said merely to have 'questioned' the notion of the post-1870 period as one of Maori withdrawal and sullen apathy. But 'purely empirical revision' has attacked 'only the symptom of the disease. The Hydra's heads are lopped off right and left but the body remains unthreatened — even unrecognized.' The old legend endures, says Belich, because it is 'an aspect of the New Zealand *mentalité*'. What is needed to deal with it, and what he claims to supply, 'is some alternative model, which is similarly clear, comprehensive, and connected' (p.301). His alternative model of New Zealand race relations involves a Pakeha and a Maori zone, essentially geographic, interacting but autonomous in that neither could coerce or rule the other. Maori independence predominated until 1863. In 1863-9 'the tide of Maori autonomy began to turn' and from 1869 until some point early this century 'it gradually ran out' (p.302). The emphasis is on the gradualness, for until the late nineteenth century the Maori retained a great deal of freedom of action and were treated very circumspectly by the government.

These claims are unsatisfactory. I would have thought that even a cursory reading of previous writers on the post-1870 period — Sorrenson on the King movement, Williams on Maori political organizations, myself on the slow extension of civil in-

stitutions in the same period — would realize that we have long since not merely questioned but thoroughly demolished the myth of Maori 'sullen withdrawal'. All those accounts reveal that the Maori retained considerable freedom of action and were treated cautiously by most settler governments, and that their engagement with settler institutions — the courts, schools and the English language, the parliamentary process — was considered, deliberate and periodically withdrawn, as it still is. The legend that Belich set out to destroy has already been slain in the scholarly histories and the view of Maori-settler relations which he seeks to develop is already substantially to be found in them.

Indeed it has been asserted with rather more subtlety than in Belich's summary version, for none of us, I think, would suggest that Maori autonomy actually 'ran out'. The capacity for effective military resistance did — rather earlier than Belich would have us believe — but there were of course other forms of autonomy.

His criticism of previous historians appears in part to have been developed in order to make the claims for his methodology look good. The method, he suggests, has wide general application. 'We rely largely on men for evidence about women, on conformists for our evidence about deviants, and on élites for evidence about non-élites. We must confront this historiographical problem, not sneak past it in the cloak of pragmatic empiricism' (p.335). This is to be done through alternative models, to provide a focus for debate, a format for reassessing the evidence and 'to facilitate the percolation of scholarly revision through to the wider public' (p.301).

These claims can be challenged in substance. To begin with, the distinction between so-called empirical history and model building is in some respects false. Empirical approaches are not devoid of hypotheses, of tentative models if you like, which can be applied to the study of ideology or the *mentalité* of groups as to any other subject matter. Moreover, they frequently disclose a pattern of relationships and meanings quite different from the ones previously believed, even if neither the new nor the old are explicitly called 'models'. (As noted, I believe that Sorrenson, Williams and I have done this for late nineteenth-century race relations.) Indeed I suspect that Belich himself, like most of us, began to canvas the evidence in an empirical way, with tentative hypotheses, discovered form and pattern and used it intelligently to reinforce discovery, in that order.

Claims beyond these for alternative models in historical research are troubling. Belich acknowledges one of the dangers: 'the model might be simply less wrong than the legend' (p.301). How true. Thus pitting one model against another can obfuscate rather than clarify. It can add another layer of misinformation to be cleared away, laboriously, before we can begin to get at the contemporary realities or accurate interpretations of them. Build up enough layers and we soon arrive at the not unfamiliar picture of academics building careers on theory-chopping, or dividing into factions which compete and talk past one another, to the point where intelligent members of the community doubt the worth of universities or — what is worse — of scholarship.

But there is a greater danger still in excessive claims for models. It is true that most people habitually shape their main value systems and relationships in terms of symbols and social metaphors of a fairly simple kind. One way of changing their thinking is to make a sharp revelation of the symbols and metaphors they are using and offer radically different ones. Teachers sometimes do this in their lecture and class rooms. But it is mainly politicians and polemicists who do it, to mobilize support for their cause — one race against another, men against women, and vice versa. Sociological or historical model building is not totally removed from this process; sadly it is often

altogether too closely involved. As Belich acknowledges, his purpose too is expedient or populist, to affect public debate. At a time when debate on race relations in New Zealand is all too heavily marked by slogan and stereotype, by myth and alternative myth, he warns of the 'danger' of 'lapsing into the hackneyed catchcry of the revisionist historian, that "in reality, things were much more complicated"' (p.301). On the contrary I rather feel that New Zealanders of all races badly need to have their noses rubbed in complexity, to soften and humanize the sharp granularity lines of their models and their reformist as well as their reactionary zeal. Models have the smell of aggression and tyranny about them — of Pol Pot learning Marxist sociology with his implacably zealous associates in the Sorbonne, later to apply his social conceptions with cold efficiency. Making alternative models is playing the game of the enemy. Empiricism, open-mindedness to complexity, to individuality, to nuances within the pattern, is a handmaiden to liberty and tolerance. Therefore Belich's emphasis on models in this major work is a source of concern. True he does not wish to 'replace one rigid preconceived paradigm with another', but to 'use the model as a set of questions to be applied to evidence predating the full formation of the dominant interpretation and accepted or rejected as appropriate' (p.235).

Yet, he does not seem to have always followed this injunction in practice and his model (of a specifically Victorian attitude to race) has, like most consciously advanced models, come to loom too large. For example he makes much of the racist language of soldiers and settlers about their Maori adversaries during and after the wars. But this is not particularly a Victorian phenomenon, nor is it confined to relations between Europeans and 'native' people. One can argue that stubborn adversaries, enemies in battle, are always made to appear abnormal, bestial, not normal decent blokes. Otherwise how can other normal decent blokes be justified in slaughtering them, or how else could they overcome us, the righteous and the just? This is obviously how Japanese and Vietnamese were regarded in World War II and the Vietnam War. But in 1905 when the Japanese, who were then allies of the British, were at war with unpopular Czarist Russia, British writers depicted them as noble and correct in their conduct. The Russians, for all the evil and atrocity of the Stalinist regime before 1941, were, for the brief years of our alliance with them against fascism, noble patriots. Yesterday's terrorists become today's partisans. When passions die and political needs change, enemies are exonerated. So it was with Rewi by 1870 and Te Kooti by 1883. Meanwhile former allies like Majors Te Whero and Kemp were traduced when they joined the resistance to land grabbing. It is all rather political. If we must have models I would offer one that gives much more to fluctuations of time and place and personality, to cynicism and caprice, to economic imperatives, to the sense of security or insecurity — even if the public has to think and wrestle a bit harder.

Whatever my reservations about Dr Belich's larger claims for his methodology, his discussion of the wars themselves makes the book among the most original and valuable publications in this decade. It will already be apparent that he is an exciting and provocative thinker and an exuberant writer. He throws up challenges, paradoxes, new suggestions on every page, with an evident enjoyment of the dramatic phrase, the verbal flourish. At times this leads him into excesses. He claims, for example, that Te Kooti 'destroyed' the British and Maori settlements at Poverty Bay. Not to my certain knowledge, for my grandfather resumed the land he had fled as a youth soon after Te Kooti's raid, and the main Maori kainga are still there. It was, says Belich, 'one of the most cleverly planned guerilla raids ever launched'

(p.229). Really? In all history? Yet he makes one think and confront the possibilities and it is all highly readable.

The book restores the New Zealand wars to their proper magnitude and importance in nineteenth-century colonial and military history, and gives the Maori military achievement long overdue attention and recognition.

ALAN WARD

University of Newcastle, New South Wales

The J. M. Sherrard Awards in New Zealand Regional History

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Awards for 1985:

Mary B. Boyd — *City of the Plains: a history of Hastings*, Victoria University Press for Hastings City Council, Wellington, 1984.

A. J. Dreaver — *Horowhenua County and its People: a centennial history*, Dunmore Press for Horowhenua County Council, Palmerston North, 1984.

Darrel Latham — *The Golden Reefs: an account of the great days of quartz-mining at Reefton, Waiuta and the Lyell*, Pegasus Press, Christchurch, 1984.

Special Commendation:

W. R. Kirk — *Pulse of the Plain: a history of Mosgiel*, Mosgiel Borough Council, Mosgiel, 1985.

Commendations:

Arthur P. Bates — *A Pictorial History of the Wanganui River*, Wanganui Newspapers, Wanganui, 1985.

Eric Harrison — *Kohukohu*, Kohukohu Historic and Arts Society, Kohukohu, 1983.