

## Antipodean Crab Antics

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PETER MUNZ'S tirade about *Two Worlds* raises a number of philosophical questions, some well-directed, others not. I will try to concentrate on these in this brief response. It would be easy to be distracted into defensiveness, or fury, by Munz's absolute negativity about the book, and his penchant for linguistic pugilism. I am comforted, however, by the certain knowledge that Munz's is not the only historian's view of *Two Worlds*. From the time that the book was in draft until now, it has been extensively vetted and reviewed. The sections that Munz most savagely criticizes (on Europe, and England, for instance) were checked in draft by historians with specialist knowledge of the subject-matter, the book was peer-reviewed before its release in Canada, United States and the United Kingdom; it has been widely reviewed internationally; and it is a matter of record that *Two Worlds* received (from historians) the Ernest Scott prize for 'the most notable contribution to the history of Australia or New Zealand' for 1991-2. As one might expect, the reviewers have been of many different political and philosophical persuasions. Strange, then, that so many have been generous about a book which Munz describes as 'uncritical', 'opportunistic', 'politically correct', and as 'gross disinformation'. If Munz is right, and *Two Worlds* is without merit, then not only I am mis-informed, it seems. If Munz is wrong, and *Two Worlds* has virtues as well as flaws, then he over-states his case and fails his own standards of fair judgement.

There are three main lines of argument in Peter Munz's review that should probably be addressed. Firstly, Munz complains that the contextual descriptions in *Two Worlds* (of 'Maori' ways of living at different periods, as well as European ways of life) are unbalanced, probably wilfully so. Secondly, he infers from two lines in the introduction to the book (which mention that I read Heidegger, Foucault, Ricoeur, Gadamer, Habermas, Derrida and Eco) that I am an unregenerate post-modernist. From then on, I am flailed for philosophical views that in fact I do not hold. Thirdly, Munz claims (this time correctly) that I don't believe in social or cultural evolution. This he sees as yet another folly on my part. I shall consider each of Munz's arguments in turn.

### **The Contextual Descriptions**

The purpose of the contextual descriptions in *Two Worlds* was to locate the first encounters between Maori and Europeans in wider historical ethnographic settings. In the twelve-year process of research and writing the book, I became

curious about the European explorers, their home societies and shipboard communities, as well as about the particular Maori communities that they visited. I wondered why the Europeans reacted to, and described Maori in certain ways, and how this shaped their encounters with Maori and their accounts of what had happened. I was equally curious about Maori reactions, and their accounts of Europeans. In the end this dual curiosity produced the narrative structure of *Two Worlds*, with its opening descriptions of seventeenth-century Maori and Western European life, followed by more precise accounts of European expeditions from particular home societies meeting up with the members of particular Maori communities at particular times.

One of Peter Munz's complaints about *Two Worlds* is that it fails to be comparative in a certain (evolutionary) way. It is true that western narratives of 'exploration' and 'discovery' have generally been comparative, often naïvely so. Descriptions of the 'Other' in such accounts have been crafted, implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to conceptions of the western 'self', usually negatively so. 'We' are literate, they are non-literate; 'we' are technologically advanced, they are backward; 'we' are civilized, they are savage or primitive; 'we' are complex, they are simple; 'we' have open, they have closed societies and minds; 'we' are developed, they are undeveloped and so on. The criteria of comparison are chosen so that the things 'we' have, they are seen to lack; the comparative judgements are loaded in advance. Not only Westerners are prone to such strategies of self-congratulation. As an anthropologist, I know them to be culturally commonplace.

My difficulty with Munz is that his characterizations of Maori capacities fall squarely within this ancient, ubiquitous tradition of negative descriptions of the 'Other'. Maori, according to Munz, were not good observers, were not interested in Europeans, had no schema in which to locate these islands when they found them, belonged to a 'closed' society, had a discontinuous history here, had 'restricted' community fora (marae) which encouraged taboos and discouraged questioning, and indeed, had 'early' minds. Like so many such descriptions, Munz's do not seem to be founded on a detailed knowledge of the matters being discussed. Because I can think of a myriad of counter-examples to each of his descriptions, I have looked for evidence of close inquiry on his part into such pertinent matters as early Maori investigations of European life (which were extensive), Pacific navigation and mapping systems (which did exist), the marae tradition of disputation (which has always been intensely argumentative), and Maori abilities in philosophical debate (which led to early European pleas to send more intelligent, better educated missionaries to New Zealand, since Marsden's artisans were being ridiculed by Maori), but failed to find it. In the absence of proper inquiry, there is no reason to take Munz's assessments of Maori capabilities particularly seriously, and thus his ability to make balanced judgements in this area is suspect, and his ability to evaluate those of others.

Far from wanting to emulate Peter Munz in his comparative strategies, then, I regard these as stereotypical and ill-informed, and unlikely to have added anything of value to the book. Of the contextual descriptions in *Two Worlds*, I can only say that the investigations of Maori life on which they were based were

intensive, involving scrutiny of archaeological findings, the relevant landscapes and surviving artefacts, as well as tribal histories, were checked in draft by tribal and other experts, and are backed by almost thirty years of sustained enquiry into Te Ao Maori (the 'Maori World'). On the European side, my understandings were based on long and arduous study of the relevant literature, were also checked in draft by reputable experts,<sup>1</sup> and have survived the scrutiny of historians other than Peter Munz. The contextual accounts were as meticulous and as fair as I could make them, which is not to say I think them perfect in any way. In the end, readers of *Two Worlds* will have to make up their minds on this matter for themselves.

### Post-Modern Fancy Dress

As for the theoretical questions which seem to have provoked Munz's particular fury: in two lines in the Introduction to *Two Worlds*, I said that in considering the relation between Maori and European systems of knowledge, I had read thinkers such as Heidegger, Habermas, Gadamer, Foucault, Derrida, Eco and others. On that basis, Munz attributes to me an extraordinary array of doctrines, almost none of which I subscribe to. I do not believe, for instance that 'the past' or 'the facts' speak for themselves — in my experience only people do that. I do not believe 'ethnocentric testimony' to be 'the final truth' — neither mine nor Munz's nor anybody else's. I do not think that 'science is a form of European fiction', nor that 'a text is a text is a text and there is nothing but the text'. In fact, I am philosophically quite conservative (although my philosophies arise from Maori as well as European thinking, which is maybe not conservative at all), subscribing to the notion of a phenomenal world (te ao tuuroa) (*Two Worlds*, p.431) and more or less faithful (pono) accounts of it (*Two Worlds*, p.12). Where science works I assume it has truth value of some kind, although I would not generalize this to all of western knowledge, nor to all of western life.<sup>2</sup> As for texts, my approach to them was made quite clear in the Preface to *Two Worlds*: 'to try to respect the perspectives of both sides, while taking the narratives of neither side for granted'.

My essential complaint about much past scholarship on European 'discovery' and 'exploration' is thus not strictly post-modernist at all. I have argued that many scholars in this field have been too partial and restricted in their enquiries, privileging European versions of events at the expense of the more balanced and informative reconstructions that might be arrived at if other lines of evidence were included. I have learned from Foucault, Heidegger, Mary Hesse, Derrida,

1 The only point on which Munz is prepared to argue that *Two Worlds* makes a false statement, a minor comment about 'medieval towns' in the Netherlands at about 800 AD, turns out to be a trivial matter of semantics. Settlements such as Utrecht, Dorestad, Maastricht and Nijmegen, with fortifications, churches, markets and houses existed at that time, and have been called 'towns' by some authorities. If they could equally be called 'villages', this is scarcely a scandalous error on my part.

2 Anne Salmond, 'Maori Epistemologies', in Joanna Overing, ed., *Reason and Morality*, London, 1985.

Said and others some of the ways in which and the reasons why this happens; just as I have learned from Eruera Stirling and other elders how illuminating tribal versions of past events involving Europeans can be. Once again, Munz has been too quick to jump to conclusions. Just because I cite some thinkers, that does not mean that I agree with everything they say.

### Evolutionary Excesses

Finally, Munz complains that I am not a cultural or social evolutionist. In this he is quite right. This particular kind of 'grand narrative' seems to me the height of human hubris; and one which in the service of imperialism has justified atrocities and wreaked havoc on non-western populations. The whole idea of tracing human cultural development back to some 'black Eve' in a 'neutral' and 'value-free' way seems to me quite fanciful. The scope of the generalizations involved, and the paucity of evidence on key issues (for instance, what can we possibly know about 'black Eve's' kinship systems, cosmologies, languages and thinking?) leaves so much room for speculation that to make strong truth claims in this area seem to me both unscholarly and irresponsible. Furthermore, there is an excellent (pre-post-modernist) literature on the history of these ideas in the West (from A.O. Lovejoy's account of the mediaeval and Enlightenment 'Great Chain of Being', to Margaret Hodgen's account of how 'savages' were construed as 'early' precursors when the Great Chain was temporalized in early versions of social evolution),<sup>3</sup> which should alert us to the likelihood that here we are back in the realm of self-congratulatory stories, along with geo-centred universes and worlds made by God for Man. Munz seems to think that one can purge ideas of cultural evolution of interested self-pleading; his own descriptions of Maori capacities shows how difficult that must be.

In the parochial play of New Zealand ethnic politics, I am often astonished by the confidence with which people who have no particular knowledge or understanding of Maori language or philosophies feel free to dismiss them in various ways. One would suppose that scholars, with their devotion to investigation as the basis of reliable knowledge, would be more careful. Peter Munz shows no such scholarly caution in his characterizations of Maori life. His review of *Two Worlds* is aggressive and patronizing; in certain respects it is also careless and unfair. If it stimulates reflection on important historiographical issues, however, it is valuable. As Maori elders say in contesting variant versions of the past on their 'restricted', 'taboo-ridden' speaking-grounds — 'Kia tuutuu ai te puehu i runga i te marae' — 'Let the dust rise up on the marae'.

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<sup>3</sup> A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, Cambridge, Mass., 1950; Margaret Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Philadelphia, 1964.