

Painted Histories: Early Maori Figurative Painting. By Roger Neich, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1993. 329 pp. NZ price: \$79.95. ISBN 1-86940-087-9.

IT IS MORE than twenty years since Hirini Moko Mead enjoined scholars to examine the ways that meeting houses function as the museums and history books of Maori communities.¹ Working as a professional ethnologist first for the National Museum of New Zealand, and later, for the Auckland Institute and Museum, Roger Neich has spent much of that time visiting those museums and reading their texts. His conclusions are of interest not just to New Zealand art historians, but also to scholars wishing to balance the bureaucratic records of European expansion with an appreciation of the ways indigenous peoples engaged with colonialism.

The core of the book is an account of the development of figurative painting in the late nineteenth century. A chapter on painting in pre-European Maori society sets the framework for a detailed analysis of the aesthetic and historical dynamics of kowhaiwhai, the abstract designs found principally on meeting house tahu (ridgepoles) and heke (rafters). This establishes painting as an artform less mired in spiritual and technical restrictions than arts of higher status and longer apprenticeship such as wood-carving and tattooing. Painting, Neich points out, was the most individualistic and ideologically responsive of the Maori visual arts.

Throughout *Painted Histories* Neich illustrates the importance of attentiveness to the regional variations in Maori painting. The book is also relentlessly historical in its insistence on examining the conditions in which art is produced. The early sections on abstract painting and the later chapters on the emergence of figurative painting are bridged by an account of nineteenth-century cultural changes in Maori society, emphasising the impact of the political and social challenges of colonialism on both the form and function of meeting houses. He argues against static notions of culture that would see the 'traditional' Maori arts as timeless, and post-contact innovations such as figurative painting as corruptions. Instead we are given a vivid picture of one of the allegedly most traditional structures of Maori communities as subject to a series of radical changes even before large scale European settlement. The rangatira houses of the 1770s evolved into the 'traditional' wharenui of the 1840s in order to accommodate new political and social needs, not the least of which was the 'non-traditional' purpose of sheltering the crowds who wanted to hear the Christian message.

The usefulness of Neich's understanding of cultural change and cultural persistence as dynamic and dialectic is graphically illustrated in the three chapters tracing the rise of figurative painting in the 1870s and its efflorescence in the meeting houses built by Te Kooti Arikirangi and the Ringatu church in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century figurative painting fell out of favour as a decorative device in wharenui. Ironically European influences, frequently represented as the instigators of change in non-European societies, acted to inhibit innovation. Static and apolitical notions of 'traditional' culture prompted the rejection of figurative painting as a corruption of 'purer' forms of Maori art. As Neich notes, both the practice and the study of nineteenth-century Maori painting subsequently languished. In many cases paintings were allowed to decay beyond recognition, and in others the art was deliberately removed. Paintings held in museums collections were seldom exhibited. Nonetheless, despite this

¹ S.M. Mead, *Decorated Houses, Storehouses and other Structures of the Maori*, Working Papers in Anthropology No. 26, Maori Studies, Department of Anthropology, The University of Auckland, 1972.

neglect, the painted houses represent an important phase in Maori visual art. The book's appendix lists 85 structures erected from 1872 to 1926, many still standing and some recently restored, decorated in some measure with figurative painting.

This is more than a catalogue however. Neich contends that colonialism encouraged Maori to express group identities in new ways. In his view, the meeting houses of the first half of the nineteenth century are to be read primarily as efforts to construct identity around genealogy. The painted houses of the later part of the century sought to supplement, and sometimes, supercede genealogy with historical narrative, using 'the specific history of the group to define their religious identity, their local and tribal identity, and their identity as Maori vis à vis the Pakeha Europeans'. This is an interesting take on the changing nature of Maori identity in the face of colonization and one that deserves to be tested against the written record.

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Whaiora. Māori Health Development. By Mason Durie. Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1994. 238 pp. Price: \$A29.95. ISBN 0-19558-3167.

'IF THERE is a single conclusion to *Whaiora*', writes Mason Durie, 'it must be that Maori health is more complicated than illness, injury, or lifestyle. People belong to families, communities, and a nation and are reflective of the values and policies therein.' True to the new social history of medicine, Durie views the history of Maori health and health care in the same way. He shows that the history of health care is not simply about diseases and medical 'advances' but also about colonization, land deprivation, race relations, and social change. The history of health care is viewed as part of mainstream history.

In 'The depopulation of the Pacific', a paper given at a medical history conference in Auckland in August 1994, Donald Denoon called for a refocusing of attention of historians away from 'depopulation' to 're-population', arguing that population resilience deserves more attention than it has received. This is the focus of Mason Durie's study ('After all', as he writes, 'despite predictions to the contrary, Maori have survived and are more numerous than at any other time in history'). His is a story of 'struggle, challenge, threat, adaptation, and adjustment'. He examines the role played by Maori initiatives and agency in health care since European contact, with a particular emphasis on the post 1900 period and even greater emphasis on the 'Decade of Maori Development', following the 1984 Hui Taumata.

Mason Durie identifies three patterns of Maori participation in health since 1900 according to the location of mana, the type of leadership and the purpose of intervention — Mana Rangatira (1900-30), Mana Wāhine (1931-74), and Mana Māori (1975-92). The Young Maori Party (YMP) is the focus of his attention for the early decades. In stressing the part played by the YMP, however, he underestimates the role played by district nurses in health promotion within Maori communities. They are portrayed simply as agents of colonization and Westernization, whereas recent research has shown them as adaptable and prepared to work through Maori customs. One gets the impression that their contributions are dismissed because they were generally not Maori, although in the discussion of the subsequent period the contribution of the Scottish district nurse, Robina