

Contested Ground: Australian Aborigines under the British Crown. Edited by Ann McGrath. Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1995. 415pp. Australian price: \$29.95. ISBN 1-86373-646-8.

THIS COLLECTION of ten essays addresses issues of regional difference in Australian Aboriginal history as well as the 'contested ground' of attempting to construct indigenous histories. It raises questions relevant to the writing of cross-cultural history in Aotearoa/New Zealand. As a consequence, apart from the intrinsic interest of the essays, the book is provocative for New Zealanders.

Only one of the authors is Aboriginal, or a Pallawah (from Tasmania) as she prefers to identify herself. Both facts are significant. 'Aboriginal' is a term coined by the European colonizers for the indigenous peoples they encountered; only clan (or tribal) identities existed before the European settlement of Australia, and no generic name made sense to the clans. However, Maori did develop a collective name for themselves by the 1830s, having earlier devised one for their visitors — 'Pakeha'. The essay 'Tasmania: 2' by Maykutenner (Vicki Matson-Green) is juxtaposed against essay 'Tasmania: 1', written by the editor, Ann McGrath. Maykutenner demonstrates convincingly that a writer from within a culture asks different questions of the past. She is the only author who directly addresses the issue of Aboriginal 'sovereignty'. Even more significantly, only she links this claim to a theme which other essays discuss: the many children of dual descent who were removed by governmental and religious institutions from their Aboriginal parents, in order to hasten the extinction of that identity. 'Breeding out', often justified by a 'scientific' argument, was practised throughout Australia. But for many Aborigines, like Maori, their reclamation of an indigenous identity is not about 'race' but about culture, lines of descent, and chosen social values. In Australia, a colonists' terminology of race developed with terms such as 'quadroon' and 'octoroon' being adopted, while in New Zealand 'half-caste' and 'quarter-caste' were in parlance until at least the 1950s. But 'mestizaje', the admixture of peoples, is a cultural issue as yet little addressed in New Zealand's historiography. Studies of families of dual descent will enlarge our understanding of the multiplicity of the colonial experience; this will become a future area for research in both countries.

Richard Broome's essay on Victoria takes up the theme of 'victim and voyager', and I find his view refreshing. Broome moves the discussion away from the issues of Aboriginal displacement and dispossession, the destruction of Aboriginal autonomy, and the massive depopulation (due largely to introduced diseases) — the shared horrors of the colonial experience for the clans — to other more positive experiences. If the purpose of history is to inform — to open doors that have been kept locked by silence and by ignorance — it must also address the opportunities created by the European penetration, some of which can still be seized to advantage. The legal assumption adopted at the founding of the Australian colonies — that the continent was empty, open for invasion — has been powerfully challenged in law in the 1990s. It will continue to be challenged as the implications of the law spread into general understanding; and the inexorable processes of internal decolonization will redistribute political power and economic resources in Australia and Aotearoa. While the solutions found in the two countries will not be identical, the shared goals of the indigenous are not dissimilar: to create effective forms of autonomy for themselves. Historians in both societies are contributing substantially to these developments, whether they identify themselves as being of tribal, aboriginal or European descent.

A concluding discussion by McGrath on the role of historians in the processes of

internal decolonization raises further matters relevant to current developments in New Zealand. She moves through the debate about 'appropriation' of indigenous histories, the different forms of historical writing by Aboriginal writers, particularly with their focus on kinship and family, the ways in which the different forms of narrative broaden and alter understandings, and the crucial role the historians have played, and will continue to play, in identifying the major issues of the past for contemporary generations. Her essay serves to show that, in both countries, large steps have been taken in the development of cross-cultural history in the last decade. McGrath writes also of a new fear of offending Aborigines, which has driven a number of younger, talented historians away from the field of indigenous history, together with a new puritanism, which shuts out aboriginal history from 'settler' history on the grounds that aboriginal history cannot be represented adequately by European historians. These are attitudes created by new sensitivities, and I have encountered them among students and colleagues; but they are dangerous attitudes, serving only to close off understanding and to 'segregate' history. This useful collection of essays airs problems and issues; but equally importantly it looks positively at the achievements of the recent historians who have turned to address the hidden stories of the Aborigines, and who, by so doing, have begun to change the way that Australians understand the impact of colonialism in their own land.

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Comparing the Policy of Aboriginal Assimilation: Australia, Canada and New Zealand. By Andrew Armitage. University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 1995, 286pp. Canadian price: \$24.95. ISBN 0-7748-0459-9.

COMPARATIVE PROJECTS are a minefield of scholarly disasters waiting to happen. Perhaps the biggest danger is the risk of a book fragmenting into unrelated case studies of disparate phenomena. In *Comparing the Policy of Aboriginal Assimilation* Andrew Armitage imposes enough structure on his argument to avoid this pitfall, but in doing so he veers into an equally hazardous territory, that of bland over-generalization. Along the way there are also the expected outsider's errors: 'Van Diemens Land' is yet to be charted, 'Macquarie' a new addition to the ranks of New South Wales' Governors, Alan Ward, Claudia Orange and Jamie Belich curious omissions from the bibliography on New Zealand native policy, 'Nga Morenu' a book still unwritten; and Graham Butterworth has yet to change his name to George.

Armitage, an associate professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria, has a background in the study of child and social welfare rather than in imperial history or the history of indigenous peoples. While his summaries of imperial and national native policies are adequate as schematics, they would not, on their own, inspire a reader to think more deeply about the competing interests and pressures that produced these policies. Nor is enough done to illustrate the variety of indigenous responses to efforts to assimilate native people. Few native voices are heard and most of those are quoted from well-worn published sources, not primary material. There is a curiously bloodless tone to the descriptions of policies which had tragic consequences. When Armitage wishes to