

Reviews

Redemption Songs. A Life Of Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki. By Judith Binney. Auckland University Press/Bridget Williams Books, Auckland, 1995. 666pp. NZ price: \$79.95. ISBN 1-86940-131-X.

REDEMPTION SONGS is an immensely detailed study of the life and works of one of the greatest Maori leaders of the nineteenth century, Te Kooti Arikirangi. It carefully traces his turbulent passage from picaresque youth and what he himself claimed was loyal support for the government in the East Coast conflict of 1865; through unjust imprisonment, miraculous escape, and stunning military feats in the period 1866-72; to full development as a religious and cultural innovator in the 20 years thereafter. The book is a remarkable achievement. It comprehends a complex prophetic resistance movement to an extent that, I suspect, few equivalent studies anywhere could match. Though the author is of an opposite culture, gender, and era to the subject, it is written from the conceptual inside — a triumphant affirmation of the capacity of historical literature to cross the various divides with which it deals. *Redemption Songs*' 666 pages embody an awe-inspiring feat of dedication and application, to which Judith Binney devoted something like 12 years. It is a big book in every respect, including the problematic.

Te Kooti was a remarkable leader in war, politics, religion, art, and (in his youth) mischief. 'There can be no single truth about such a man', writes Binney, 'and this book contains many histories.' She goes on to claim that different historical understandings are merely 'juxtaposed', 'so that each retains its integrity'. If this were wholly true, it would leave reviewers with the problem of which history to review, and expose *Redemption Songs* to serious methodological criticism. It is not wholly true. In practice as against theory, Binney usually privileges one version of history, namely her interpretation of Te Kooti's own. This interpretation, while sensitive and moderate, cannot be said to be non-partisan — something which is perhaps most obvious in the discussion of mass killings, notably those at Poverty Bay in November 1868. Privileging the subject is hard to avoid in biography. The author needs to get close, to empathize and understand. The occupational hazard is that it is hard to pull away, but the benefits can exceed the costs, as they do in this case. The book does have a perspective, lending guts and coherence. Claims of pluralism or relativism notwithstanding, it tells *the* untold side of a great story.

Redemption Songs is structured partly by time, partly by Te Kooti's journeys, and partly by the remarkably substantial body of writing that he and his acolytes produced. The sources should determine the content of historical writing, but it is not so obvious that they should determine the form. Structure and method combine to create some unresolved contradictions and frustrations, at least for this reader. Key themes are touched on as they arise, and in several cases the net effect is unsatisfying. Te Kooti was of chiefly descent (p.29) but not of chiefly descent (p.361). We needed more on his trips to Auckland, early and late, and on his responses to the Pakeha world it represented. He is said to have been able to read English, but not speak it, yet is quoted conversing colloquially with a Pakeha guard on the Chatham Islands: 'Plenty of rain Bob'. The shift of some tribal groups from

violent hostility in the 1870s to strong support in the 1880s is insufficiently explained. There is sometimes a certain primness, which occasionally seems to reify Te Kooti, and prevent him coming through to us in full colour as a 'wag' of great charm and pleasant expression who drank schnapps for preference — though Binney does tellingly compare him to the Loki-like legendary heroes, Maui and Tawhaki. Above all, Te Kooti the social revolutionary, preaching change within Maoridom as well as resisting dangers from without, is insufficiently analysed. From 1868, perhaps even before, his position seems to have been pan-tribal and anti-chiefly — almost as much of a threat to traditional Maori society as to Pakeha. The merging of social with ethnic resistance in prophetic movements is well known internationally, and it needed more explicit exploration here. There is no doubt that Binney has the analytical skills for this; it is the method and structure that she has chosen which sometimes hamper her use of them.

There are places in *Redemption Songs* where the reader bogs down in detail, or where the tone becomes almost exegetical — whole pages discussing a single enigmatic saying. But the thickly-descriptive level of detail becomes addictive once you adjust to it; the style first engages, then absorbs. Like the method, the style is reminiscent of good literary biography: sometimes difficult, but rich and weighty, a fascinating and complex mind lovingly preserved in its own medium, in this case spiritual. The spiritual was Binney's preferred dimension in her previous books too. If there is an element of personal quest in this, I wish all such inner voyages so enriched the cultures which housed them.

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Nga Uruora/The Groves of Life: Ecology and History in a New Zealand Landscape. By Geoff Park. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1995. 376pp. NZ price: \$39.95. ISBN 0-86473-291-0.

IF MY JOURNEY in Cook's wake has a particular intent it is to find the spot where, with an axe and a quadrant and some carefully chosen words, his shore-party enshrined such trees in New Zealand history' (p.31). In *Nga Uruora*, Geoff Park introduces the reader to the fertile coastal plains of New Zealand which once promised rich opportunity to Maori and Pakeha, but have now disappeared. Commencing with Cook's *Endeavour* party on the Hauraki Plains, and the New Zealand Company's arrival in the Hutt Valley, Park takes us through the river flatlands and on a journey through landscapes which exist today as testimony to the imperatives of colonial settlement. These same landscapes saw the wanton destruction and transformation of the indigenous forests and swamps as part of the imperial drive towards 'progress'. Working within these wider parameters, Park focuses his discussion on four places where small remnants of the forests' indigenous ecosystems of kahikatea and harakeke still survive. Literally following in the footsteps of early explorers, the author travels by canoe and overland to Tauwhare on the Mokau river. Papatonga in Horowhenua, Whanganui Inlet and Punakaiki on the South Island's west coast. On arrival, he discusses the particular histories of these places, their significance to Maori, their importance to conservation efforts and their continued vulnerability. The central thesis of *Nga Uruora* is that these forgotten parts of New Zealand must be saved, or at the very least shielded from the ravages of western