

Reviews

Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders from Polynesian Settlement to the end of the Nineteenth Century. By James Belich. Penguin, Auckland, 1996. 497 pp. NZ price: \$59.95. ISBN 0-713-99171.

JAMIE BELICH is keen on coining terms: perhaps Beliching will come to mean biting at big themes, bouncing off old ones and bettering them all. It will certainly indicate something big. At 450 pages of text and a volume yet to come, this general history is not a likely choice for the casual browser in search of an introduction to New Zealand history. It is not a book that is easy to dip into for general information — concepts are carried through so that if you miss the Belich definition of 'Smithing' in one part, you will be mystified later in the text. It is assumed that the reader will devour the volume in one sitting. Mostly the taste is sharp and very satisfying but there are some parts which might cause indigestion. *Making Peoples* will become essential reading for those who wish to engage fully with New Zealand's past. It is a large book with large aims, including a promise to engage with global history in case it be thought parochial: a book packed full of new myths to replace the old.

In the quest to make us a nation, Belich seeks pasts in common: both Maori and Pakeha cultures began as 'migrant ships' pushing through 'dangerous seas' four centuries after the death of Christ. Both cultures 'valued kin above all, walked with live gods — Tu and Thor, Woden and Tane — and lived and died for weregild and *utu*' (p.13). Difference becomes dissolved in commonality and New Zealand's past asserts its place in global history. We too have ancient origins, even if the Pakeha origins lie on distant shores. The charting of the displacements of those who became known as the 'English' points to a Pakeha past which shares the later displacement of the Maori.

Belich has immersed himself in New Zealand historiography, has decided that most is boring or wrong, and he will put matters to rights. Under his gaze we are invited to see New Zealand history emerging from interactions of the time and place from which most early migrants came ('the fragment') with the new environment ('the frontier') and an 'ethos of expansion': a neat tripartite explanation as are many others in this book. The book consists of three sections: 'Making Maori', 'Contact and Empire', and 'Making Pakeha'. It is, therefore, like a sandwich, Maori origins on one side, the meeting of Maori and Pakeha in the middle, and Pakeha origins and progress on the other side.

This organization has strengths and weaknesses. Its great strength is Belich's willingness to grapple with prehistory. His overview of archaeological work will prove extremely useful to those who are unfamiliar with the arguments about voyaging and settlement. Belich is willing to add his guesses to those of others, believing that an informed guess is better than no opinion at all. The evidence suggests to him that the first Polynesian settlers were initially restricted to the northern third of the North Island, that the founding group probably numbered 100 or 200, and that 'virgin New Zealand offered

a sustained protein boom', which had a major impact on population growth. These first settlers exploited a 'constellation of "resource islands"' which soon thickened into an archipelago as resources were depleted. This is fascinating stuff and deserved a few maps to assist the metaphor. Belich argues that the Polynesian settlers developed a hunter/gardener culture, which faced a crisis between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries with the extinction of big game. Maori became tribalized, fought each other and then were imposed upon by European invaders. Belich is best on combat, whether intellectual or historical. It is, therefore, the martial aspects of Maori society we hear most about and rivalry is argued to be one of the key dynamics of Maori social organization. The author is less comfortable with gender, a topic which gets oddly sectioned off. Under the heading of gender, Belich examines women's position. Masculinity, in this view of history, is unproblematic. By restricting his examination of gender to women in prehistory and 'women's lots' in chapter xv, an opportunity is lost to explore how the myths of New Zealand history, both Maori and Pakeha, are organized around gender as, in Belich's own words, 'the great divide' (p.99).

One of these myths, which Belich claims 'became central in Pakeha collective identity' (p.242) was that of 'martial New Zealandness'. But this is a specifically masculine identity. To the Pakeha sense of Us defined by confrontation with the Maori, and New Zealand Britons versus the Metropolitan ones, should be added the definition of the New Zealand male as opposed to the female. Unless gender is added to the equation women are in danger of being left outside of history because they were absent from the battles. Yet they were invoked as the reason why battles were fought at all. The right to bear arms, whether to defend 'Mother' England or one's own female relatives, made men citizens while excluding women from the body politic. The story of the apparently invincible Maui meeting his death between the thighs of Hine-nui-te-po serves as a reminder that the making of peoples is predicated upon powerful myths of sexual difference.

The middle section, 'Contact and Empire' contains a nice inversion, balancing the European discovery of New Zealand by the Maori discovery of Europe. Trade, whether in goods or women, war, and disease are more prominent in this section than ideas. We get little sense of how all the notions that the burgeoning European population took as natural and God-given, from sitting on chairs to the assumption of patriarchal authority, impacted on the social organization of peoples with differing world views. In part this is because Belich's way of proceeding is to attack existing debates, whether over fatal impact, empire or conquest. It is also because he is afraid that 'hearing about sitting, sleeping and excreting [is] almost as boring as doing it' (p.75). On the contrary, I am sure many people would find a few details on these matters riveting. A concern with everyday transformations might have served to counteract a sense of a past proceeding rationally by enumerated explanations.

The sandwich organization means that the third section, 'Making Pakeha' can exclude Maori which is perhaps what the colonisers wanted. It does mean that the whiteness of the propelling myths Belich delineates, 'Better Britain' and 'Greater Britain', is assumed rather than interrogated. In the bustle of 'the progress industry' Maori become a sideline, 'cleared away' like nature (p.367). Different histories become elided here, and there is slippage into apparently universal history. Yet we need to remember that the 'populist compact' was male and kept women out until 1893 and the 'secret ballot' was only available to the Pakeha. It was not until the 1930s that Maori received the same privilege.

Belich has produced an impressive book and I do not want to diminish his attempt to wrest form from the burgeoning scholarship on our past. It is an unenviable task and he has attacked it with panache. He has produced a combative history which cleverly argues with the ground traversed by others rather than surprising us by a new vision of ourselves. The final chapter, for example, is devoted to the critique of Fairburn, and mates and atoms

become transformed by Belich into 'crews'. This would be stimulating stuff in the pages of the *New Zealand Journal of History*; whether it is in a general history is another question. Belich will reach and influence the academic audience, but whether his reach will be wider, in the tradition of Sinclair, remains to be seen.

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Muriwhenua Land Report. A Waitangi Tribunal Report. GP Publications, Wellington, 1997. 456 pp. NZ price: \$99.95. ISBN 1-86956-202-X.

AS AN OUTSIDER, presumptuous enough to comment from afar, it seems to me that the *Muriwhenua Land Report* represents both the great strength and the distinct limitations of the Waitangi Tribunal process. The report is a detailed, meticulous and very impressive statement of the problem. At the same time, the Tribunal is equally clear that neither this report, nor necessarily the Tribunal itself, will provide the solution.

The *Muriwhenua Land Report* examines the claims of Maori in the far north of New Zealand up to 1865. The report begins with the people and the land of Muriwhenua and describes a pre-contact, independent Maori culture with a viable economy and its own world-view and laws. It goes on to look at private land transactions prior to 1840 and at the government's dealings over land between 1840 and 1865, and in each case finds in favour of the Muriwhenua people's claim that they were improperly deprived of their land. The initial 'sales' before 1840 were not valid contracts; then, after 1840, the government became complicit in these early dealings as well as continuing the process of alienation on its own behalf. None of these alienations, the Tribunal concludes, were carried out in a manner consistent with the Treaty of Waitangi or the fiduciary responsibility of the government to protect Maori interests. Though it did not end in 1865, the process of dispossession and its consequences were clearly established by then: the Muriwhenua people had been marginalized in their own land.

Of all Maori groups, the Muriwhenua hapu were among the first, and arguably the most, affected by the alienation of their land, and the Tribunal is also clear about the consequences of this marginalization. Left with insufficient land for either a subsistence or an agrarian economy, the people of Muriwhenua have faced a downward spiral of poverty and social dislocation. Their only option was to play a very limited role in an economy controlled by Europeans. Gumdigging briefly provided some income, but when it declined Maori had to move to the cities in the south to find employment, while the far north became one of the most depressed areas in New Zealand.

The Tribunal concludes this report by asserting the need for compensation to the Muriwhenua people for their many losses. It notes that, although relief cannot be dealt with in a piecemeal manner, there is also an urgent need for immediate action. The Tribunal recognizes that its next task is to propose a relief package that will compensate for past wrongs and provide an economic base for the hapu. And there the report ends.

At the heart of the *Muriwhenua Land Report* is a detailed examination, almost hectare by hectare, of the history of the alienation of the Muriwhenua from their land. Such careful historical research has become a hallmark of the Tribunal's work and there is undoubtedly great value in clearly stating the problem before entering substantive negotiations on the solution. These are lessons that other jurisdictions would do well to learn. In British