

Calling the Station Home: Place and Identity in New Zealand's High Country. By Michele Dominy. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., Lanham, 2000, 307 pp. US price: \$69.00. ISBN 0-7425-0952-4.

THE AMERICAN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGIST Elvin Hatch made an important contribution to the study of rural New Zealand society when he wrote a book based on field work carried out around Fairlie in inland Canterbury in 1981. Hatch brought an outsider's curiosity and the live-in ethnographer's methodology to bear on such key issues as status ranking. His endeavours revealed many subtleties about how status anxiety and snobbery work in rural New Zealand. Among other things he demonstrated that high country runholders still held the top status ranking even though they held less valuable assets and earned lower incomes than some downland farmers. It seemed that the mythic power and mystique of this group persisted deep into the twentieth century.

Michele Dominy is an American-trained and domiciled anthropologist like Hatch, but she has made a greater contribution because she has visited four times rather than once. Consequently, she got to know the high country farming families of the upper Rakaia Valley in North Canterbury rather better than Hatch came to know their Fairlie equivalents. This familiar and deep understanding of her subjects of study has enabled her to write a far more complex, multi-layered and scholarly book about high country farmers' sense of attachment to place than anything published previously.

Dominy begins with some excellent descriptive writing on the distinctive landscape and environment of this remote part of New Zealand. In the process she has plenty to say about the mystique of this small group of farmers, and makes clear that they are in no sense a gentry, but rather a pragmatic group of heavily interrelated families with an intimate working knowledge of this vast tract of mountainous land. She goes on to reveal that gender plays a vital role in determining the division of work, home formation (helping fill the most glaring gap in Barbara Brookes' otherwise excellent collection on the 'home' in New Zealand) and inheritance. Despite denials of the families themselves that gender has anything to do with their way of life, Dominy makes it clear that gender determines nearly every aspect of both individual and community experience from birth, through education, to retirement and passing on the lease to future generations. Indeed gender acts as mechanism to keep the large runs intact. Daughters and sisters are still prepared to hold properties together and so keep them economically viable even at the cost of maintaining their personal legal and financial interests in these crown leasehold properties with their small freehold portions.

Dominy then moves on to a more contentious analysis of 'knowing' this particular place. By interviewing runholders, observing them at work and play, and unpacking the language they use to describe this land, she makes a strong case that daily contact with the land creates an intense and deep relationship with this country. Locals, for example, can see things in this landscape that completely escape the gaze of the outsider. In arguing this, Dominy supports a contention of my own, Phillip Temple's, Brian Turner's and many others, that Pakeha attachment to land is much deeper than Maori radicals argue, in that it is emotional as well as economic; land is much more to these families than a mere commodity. This section will draw nods of recognition and support from many readers until Dominy overreaches herself by suggesting that the claims of these families are just as strong as those of Ngai Tahu who moved through rather than lived in these high country areas.

Dominy admits, just as the historian of the Canterbury runs, L.G.D. Acland, did, that few of these families can claim links to runs beyond about 1910, when the Liberal government threw runs open for closer settlement. My own preliminary computer analysis of runholders confirms the impression that families of more modest origins, compared with some of the wealthy English gents of the nineteenth century, frequently from Scottish

backgrounds in shepherding and managing runs, moved en masse onto the somewhat smaller runs. Another group of more humble servicemen joined them from the end of the First World War. In other words, very few South Island high country runholders have been on the land for more than three and at the most four generations. This is relatively short occupancy even compared with many downland farmers who have been attached to the same property for up to eight generations, let alone claiming associations back to the seventeenth century. On the other hand, the Maori method of claiming land via *ahi ka*, or continuous occupancy, only extends to a minimum of three generations. In this limited sense, these runholders have a stronger claim than, say, Ngati Toa, who had only attempted colonizing Ngai Tahu land for one generation before the Crown ripped away most of that land. Tipene O'Regan himself has acknowledged that the runholders at least use the land and have an intimate knowledge of its geography and climate, as well as a dynamic and practical relationship with it, compared with urban-based armchair greenies, who have a static relationship with that land at best. Whether or not Dominy's arguments will convince other Pakeha user-groups such as trampers, fishermen and environmentalists is another matter.

Although a most worthwhile contribution to our historical literature, this book suffers from some minor as well as more serious problems. Minor problems such as the use of Maoris for Maori, changing the journalist and essayist Monte Holcroft into the philosopher Morgan Holcroft, and splitting poor Robert Pinney into two separate personae, could easily have been rectified by a New Zealand reader. More serious problems relate to the author being 'captured' by her subjects, and employing a style which will make the book inaccessible to all but specialist, academic readers.

The advantage of the ethnographic method is that it helps the investigator better understand the point of view of the group under study. The danger though is that in return for winning access to the inner sanctum of thought, the investigator becomes captured by her/his subjects. Dominy's sympathetic reading of a group little understood by modern, urban-dwelling New Zealanders, and not much better understood by some low country farmers, is timely and necessary because the current generation of high country farmers are doing much better than their predecessors in developing more sustainable farming methods. A definite 'greening' is discernible in rural New Zealand, rabbits are currently under better control thanks to the gung-ho introduction of the Calici virus, and the invading Spanish weed, *Hieracium*, is on the retreat. But there is still too much reckless burning and we need to continue to ask if this is the best way of using this country. I suspect, therefore, that most readers outside the high country will feel that Dominy has, despite her academic caution, been 'captured'.

This problem is compounded by the decision to write some sections of the book in a rather inaccessible academic style full of the worst usages of anthropological and post-modernist jargon. Constant conversion of perfectly good nouns into verbs and chronic overuse of the notion of 'tropes' may appeal to currently fashionable academic writers, but can only bemuse many of Dominy's potential supporters and the so-called, long-suffering, 'intelligent lay reader'. This is a pity because Dominy can write beautifully and her footnotes are a delight. I would urge her to contemplate a simpler, more accessible version for readers outside the academy.

Despite these misgivings this is an important and thoughtful book which must be read by anyone interested in rural New Zealand, the pursuit of sustainable forms of land use, and our ongoing search for a more distinctive national identity.

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