

Reviews

Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000. By James Belich. Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, Auckland, 2001. 606 pp. NZ price: \$59.95. ISBN 0-7139-9172-0.

WITH *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000*, James Belich completes the project he began with *Making Peoples* (1996). As Belich himself notes in the Preface, the two volumes together make up 'the largest interpretive single-author history of New Zealand yet written' (p.11); but this work is in scope, shape and accomplishment so far in advance of previous histories of New Zealand that comparisons with predecessors, single or multi-authored, are largely beside the point.

The organizing principle of *Paradise Reforged* (a suitably ambiguous title) is Belich's notion of 'recolonization', adumbrated earlier near the end of *Making Peoples* and in a couple of other published essays, in which 'progressive colonization' before the 1880s on a scale sufficient to produce a Greater Britain is downsized and diverted into the fashioning of a more modest Better Britain, with emphasis upon close political, cultural, emotional and economic attachments to Britain. 'Recolonization' was in turn, and especially from around the 1970s, succeeded by 'decolonization'. Scholars will want to consider very carefully the arguments about a transition from 'progressive colonization' to 'recolonization', though it would be difficult to pretend that what Belich calls 'The Great Tightening' did not occur. I feel some uneasiness about applying the term 'decolonization' to changes in New Zealand during recent decades, because the word is usually deployed to characterize a rather more significant transfer of power from imperial authorities to local peoples, especially in Africa and Asia, than has taken place in New Zealand. However, 'recolonization' works very well as a heuristic device, allowing Belich to give pattern and meaning to so much of what happened in New Zealand and in the relationship between New Zealand and Britain, even if the phrase 'recolonial New Zealand' is one I would recoil from using myself.

The exposition is organized into three pairs of chapters, covering, roughly, the 1880s–1920s, 1920s–1960s, and 1960s–2000. The first chapter in each pair concentrates on 'over-history' — politics, economics, international relations, technology; the second on 'under-history' — social, demographic and cultural topics, and the 'resurgence' of Maori. This arrangement provides a broad impression of change over time without any sense of chronological constriction; and there is ample room for the development of subplots. Connections between separated but related sections are emphasized through the use of rhetorical labels which call to mind relevant earlier discussions or arguments without the need for lengthy recapitulation — The Great Tightening, mentioned above, for example, and Farmer Backbone, Race Mother, the Wild Child and similar Bunyanesque figures. In these ways the complex narrative is given persuasive coherence.

Paradise Reforged is a thoroughly original piece of history. Belich draws upon the research of others, as his endnotes indicate, including a number of graduate and postgraduate students who have produced theses of varying quality, but in most cases he re-sorts data for his own purposes. The book is therefore only to a very limited extent a report on available research. On the other hand, several pieces of research find new life through his inventive reconsiderations. He insists, quite justifiably, that it is impossible

to make any sense of New Zealand history without using the concept of class (p.126), proposes 'loose' and 'tight' as post-Marxist qualifiers, discusses 'the rise of a tight New Zealand working class' (p.143), and finds that, notwithstanding the 'laundering of history', New Zealand was closer to class war in 1912–1913 than most historians allow (p.95).

In other places, he fashions entirely new contours based on his own probing. There is, spectacularly, *The Great Mothers' Mutiny*, suggested by statistics covering the 1880s–1930s. In Britain, the genteel and respectable slowed their birthrates around the middle of the nineteenth century; the British lower classes in the first third of the twentieth century. In New Zealand, the drop was later than for the genteel in Britain, but it involved all classes, and, despite regional differences, the fall was quick and steep. Fewer women married; those who married had fewer children. How? Probably abstinence, plus abortion, rather than contraception and *coitus interruptus*. Why? 'Several developments suggest that lower-class women, as well as their higher-class sisters, took advantage of the changing circumstances to improve their lot' (pp.182–6). Belich often illuminates social changes through excellent use of statistics. He points out, for example, that while women as a percentage of the paid work force increased from 18% in the 1900s to 22% in the 1920s, for white-collar women workers the increase was from 2% in 1891 to 40% in 1921; and while men 'retained a huge pay advantage', it 'diminished significantly' between 1880 and 1910 (pp.143–4). Some of the miseries of the Depression are encapsulated in statistics also: falls in per capita consumption of beef, pork, ice cream, beer, and wines and spirits; and a decline in the percentage of wage and salary earners owning their own homes from 49% in 1926 to 38% in 1936, signalling the extent of mortgage foreclosures and the constriction of opportunity (pp.255, 260). All this without a table in sight.

The Mothers' Mutiny is just one of several discussions which explore patterns of fertility and sexuality. In World War II, sojourning United States troops provided more than flowers to New Zealand women: extrapolating from figures of marriages between Americans and New Zealanders, increases in illegitimacy and venereal disease, the absence of large numbers of New Zealand men abroad, and the supply of contraceptive sheaths for American soldiers, 'we do appear to be talking about some thousands of sexual relationships between New Zealand women and American serviceman' (p.291). Perhaps this is the place to note Belich's memorialization of another who gave good service: Welburn P.G. Butterman (p.308). There was, too, a post-war boom in teenage sex, counting the great increase in the number of brides aged 20 or less, the considerable number of marriages that were a consequence of prenuptial conception, the rise in illegitimate births and in numbers of children adopted, the anecdotal evidence of use of contraception by some teenagers, and of teenage sex which did not result in conception — all this, says Belich, suggests 'a sexual semi-revolution ten or twenty years before it was supposed to have happened, probably in the big cities in the 1950s and in the rest of the country in the 1960s' (pp.505–6).

It is difficult to discover topics Belich does not touch upon: he deals with the education system, including the rise in free-place secondary schooling in the first two decades of the twentieth century and unfunded growth in tertiary student numbers after 1975; popular culture, including American radio serials, records, novels and cars; preoccupations and expatriations in 'high' culture; the revolution wrought by air transport; the significance of unsupervised play in the experiences of New Zealand children; the way Dr Benjamin Spock became more important than Dr Truby King in the post-war baby boom; and the 'widely recognised but understudied phenomenon of . . . romantic marriage' in the same period (p.490). All these subjects, and many others, are discussed authoritatively, even if not always definitively. Indeed, Belich often outlines possibilities rather than insisting that he is correct. For example, he argues that there is sufficient evidence for the 'Wild

Child' in the nineteenth century 'at least as a working hypothesis' (p.359); and after commenting in relation to the working class that '[d]ifferent generations can have different histories', adds that 'this is yet another largely unploughed field in New Zealand historical scholarship' (p.138). He invites debate, pleads for further research, rather than laying down the law.

Belich is at his most impressive, in my opinion, when he analyses the ways in which economic circumstances structured the relationships between the British and New Zealanders, and, later, between New Zealand and other countries. The 'great New Zealand protein industry' was shaped so that '[i]n ease, reliability, low transactional costs and the quality of transport links, London was almost a *domestic* market for New Zealand' (pp.53, 68). The state promoted New Zealand in Britain to the extent that 'New Zealand was the key brand name' (p.84). While the economic nationalist W.B. Sutch might call this economic dependency, Belich suggests "'economic integration" may be a better term' (p.72). The New Zealand war effort, including the supply of troops for frontline slaughter, was designed to strengthen the recolonial relationship with Britain (pp.111, 547). What was later insulated was 'the New Zealand-British recolonial economy, not an independent one' (p.266). After the 1950s and 1960s, when 'the traditional British market ceased to be able to deliver growth to the New Zealand economy' (p.444), New Zealand had to begin restructuring its economy, and began to do so well before 1984. Thus Belich discloses the distinctiveness of New Zealand history, but in structural rather than providential, moral, racial or insular terms. Since he proposes to look at the phenomenon of recolonization in other settler societies as well, we have the prospect of comparative history. At last, the dutiful dominion writes back!

Paradise Reforged is a considerable literary as well as historiographical achievement, a work of the creative imagination that provides an epic narrative. It is a pleasure to read Belich's vigorous and colloquial but carefully wrought prose without the distractions of photographs. There are no dull bits, and there is a good deal of fun with words (as a child he must have escaped the common parental adjuration never to Play Around With Words), including some outrageous puns: when the refrigeration system on the ship *Dunedin* failed before leaving port at the end of 1881, 'The First Four Sheep and their fellows were sold off for a song in Dunedin city' (p.56); 'by the 1920s the taming of the crew was largely complete' (p.178). He reflects on the New Zealand administration in Samoa: 'Being beaten into second place as humane colonisers by imperial Germany is not a good look' (p.238). As for the gentry: 'If gentility does still exist, it is vestigial If found, there is a case for its preservation on offshore islands, such as Britain' (p.133). He eschews the remorseless solemnity that is a feature of much New Zealand historical writing. Anyone might find intellectual profit, inspiration and entertainment in *Paradise Reforged*, including those numerous secondary school students and their teachers still trapped in the thickets of Tudor and Stuart scholarship. The antiquated history syllabus, Belich points out, is not just a matter of educational underresourcing by governments in the last quarter-century, but a problem that 'stems from the recolonial system, and from a failure to fully recognise it or its legacies' (p.546).

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